Chapter 201 - 201 Recalling

201 Recalling

Lumian was taken aback, his eyes widening in surprise as he glanced at the vacant seat across from him. With a polite tone, he mustered, “Hello.”

In that instant, a memory from his sister Aurore flashed through his mind. She had once mentioned an intriguing phrase: Expert consultation!

Although I’m not entirely surrounded by invisible Psychiatrists, there are two of them, and I can’t detect them either… Lumian muttered inwardly.

The woman sitting opposite him fell silent, while Susie’s voice assumed a more relaxed and lighthearted tone.

“It seems the newspaper has left a lasting impression on you. Does that mean it had a positive impact?”

“Yes,” Lumian replied candidly.

He had reached a point where he could confront the emotional turmoil within him instead of burying it deep down. Otherwise, he would have tried to avoid any encounters with “Red Boots” Franca, as she invariably brought up Aurore.

Naturally, this evoked intense waves of emotion.

Susie skillfully redirected the conversation back to its original path.

“If you wish to further investigate any unusual coincidences that have occurred during this period and identify their underlying sources, I can assist you.”

“I won’t delve directly into your memories, but I can awaken them all and present them chronologically before your eyes. Of course, this excludes those hidden deep within the recesses of your subconscious. They pose too great a risk,” Susie explained.

“Are you willing to give it a try?”

Lumian didn’t hesitate for a moment.

“Yes.”

Whenever he noticed any coincidences around him, he would occasionally recall his recent experiences and meticulously scrutinize the corresponding details. Now,

he was merely shifting to a more effective approach.

“Lean back fully against the sofa, relax, and close your eyes…” Susie’s gentle voice reached Lumian’s ears unhurriedly.

Just as he adjusted his sitting position and prepared to calm his mind and close his eyes, a sudden “volcanic eruption” erupted within his thoughts.

This unexpected “attack” caught him off guard, leaving his subconscious unable to effectively shield him.

Magma and smoke burst forth like luminous specks, each containing a distinct scene.

The multitude of glowing dots arranged themselves chronologically, giving Lumian the sensation of watching a play with himself as the central character.

It unfolded in a blur, yet every detail remained vivid and complete.

As the temperature soared, Lumian’s mind raced, threatening to release wisps of white smoke.

He witnessed each scene and recalled every detail, skillfully connecting them and searching for any abnormalities.

Lumian’s eyes widened, and his facial features contorted in visible distress.

The memory that should have been present was now a void!

In that moment, a gentle female voice resonated within his mind.

“Has it truly vanished, or have you forgotten or overlooked it?” spoke the lady seated across from him, her tone devoid of its previous cheerfulness.

Like a lightning bolt, it illuminated Lumian’s mind, casting light into the darkest recesses beyond his subconscious.

Lumian’s expression grew increasingly pained, and he couldn’t help but bow his head as he struggled to say, “I-I see it, I see it…

“I was in conversation with the angel sealed within me!

“H—His name is Termiboros!”

At last, Lumian recollected something that had slipped his memory.

The corruption contained within his left chest was, in essence, an angel who believed in Inevitability—Termiboros!

Initially, he had intended to seek guidance from Madam Magician on how to harness the angel’s powers and avert any potential negative consequences, but he

had completely forgotten about it.

“Is this the corruption sealed within your body?” Susie’s reaction appeared unsurprised, her voice maintaining a calm demeanor.

Lumian instinctively exhaled, his fingertips reaching his forehead, already dampened with cold sweat.

He truthfully replied, “Yes, He attempted to entice me into aiding His escape from the seal, but I refused. And then, I simply forgot.

“This is truly… truly bizarre…”

Termiboros is undeniably sealed within my body and can’t break free, yet I was unwittingly affected by Him!

“That’s to be expected. One mustn’t underestimate any angel, even when sealed,” Susie offered an explanation to allay Lumian’s immediate apprehension.

The unknown was always the most terrifying.

She continued, “In ancient times, angels were also referred to as subsidiary gods. This implies that They possess the essence of a deity. Even when sealed, They can exert a certain influence upon the external world through various means.

“Did you, perhaps, believe that with the seal of the great entity, the corruption upon your chest was more akin to a boon? As long as you follow the correct procedures at the appropriate stages, you shouldn’t encounter any issues apart from enduring greater pain and assuming a certain risk of losing control.”

Lumian fell into silence, recognizing that he had entertained similar thoughts of late.

“You must remember that in such matters, the potency of a curse is no less than that of a boon, if not stronger,” warned Susie. “I don’t know how Termiboros has influenced you, but given His belief in Inevitability, I suspect His primary aim is to induce a deviation in your destiny.

“However, you needn’t worry excessively. He is, after all, sealed, and His capacity for influence is considerably limited. Moving forward, as long as you continuously assess your condition and consistently seek guidance on your actions, you can largely circumvent this predicament.”

“Alright.” Lumian retrieved a pen and paper and hastily jotted down a memo.

The note pertained to consulting Madam Magician regarding Termiboros.

He feared succumbing to the angel’s influence from the realm of Inevitability and forgetting these pertinent matters once the treatment concluded.

Lumian carefully stored away his pen and paper, releasing a slow exhale.

“Now that I’ve recollected the events involving Termiboros, I feel considerably more at ease. It appears that my spirituality had detected something.”

“I can perceive an improvement in your mental state,” affirmed Susie, echoing Lumian’s sentiments.

Taking advantage of the moment, Lumian posed a question, “Ladies, do you believe that Susanna Mattise has been fully eradicated by the official Beyonders? Or should I continue searching for clues at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons to prevent her from launching another attack?”

Taking note of the time, Monsieur Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, should soon find himself in dire straits.

Susie offered a gentle smile as she replied, “The Spectator path isn’t well-versed in divination.”

Seated across from Lumian, the “invisible” lady smiled and added, “Madam Magician is a divination expert. Did she not provide you with an answer? Or perhaps her hidden message eluded your understanding?”

She didn’t say anything… Lumian pondered for a moment, recalling Madam Magician’s response regarding Susanna Mattise.

Suddenly, he froze.

Madam Magician had continuously guided him on how to resolve the issue with Susanna Mattise, subtly hinting that he should seek assistance from Mr. K.

From a different perspective, she had never once considered the possibility that Susanna Mattise had been entirely eliminated!

In her view, this predicament would undoubtedly resurface!

Isn’t it too ambiguous? Or does she assume it’s self-evident and fails to emphasize it? Lumian mumbled to himself, nodding in realization.

“I know the answer.”

As Lumian spoke, he made a connection based on the manner and demeanor exhibited by the Psychiatrist seated opposite him when addressing Madam Magician.

Could they also be members of the secretive organization that employs tarot cards as their code names?

To which cards do they correspond?

After making some adjustments, Lumian sought clarification about his mental state.

“The mere thought of meeting Louis Lund fills me with anxiety, excitement, and adrenaline. I can’t seem to control my emotions. Is this a severe psychological issue?”

Susie responded in a soothing voice, “That’s actually quite normal. People often exhibit similar behavior when it comes to matters they deeply care about. You’re just a bit more intense than usual.

“If you didn’t react this way, I would have been concerned that you were facing a more severe psychological problem and had repressed all your emotions.

“What you need to focus on now is not being fearful or overwhelmed, but rather learning to manage those emotions.”

Normal… Lumian felt reassured by Susie’s explanation, and his concern regarding the matter at hand subsided, allowing his mental state to stabilize.

He pondered and asked, “Manage them?”

How do I do that?

Susie replied, “The simplest method is to always remind yourself not to overreact. Whenever you feel a similar surge of emotions, take deep breaths and find your calm.

“It may sound easy, but in reality, it’s quite challenging. When emotions flare up, it’s difficult for humans to maintain rationality. They rarely think about controlling themselves. By the time they regain their composure, they often find that they’ve already made a mistake.

“I can set up a trigger for you. Once your emotional reactions exceed a certain threshold, it will remind you of my words and assist you in regaining your rationality, allowing you to attempt to regain control.

“This is a temporary solution. In the long run, it will depend on your own efforts. However, once you become accustomed to self-reflection during times of heightened emotion, the issue will become more manageable.

“Are you willing to give it a try?”

“Alright.” Lumian had no qualms about accepting external assistance.

At some point, Susie’s voice took on an otherworldly and elusive quality. It felt as though she had said a great deal, yet Lumian couldn’t recall a single word. The only thing he could remember was her concluding statement: “The trigger has been set. If all goes well, it will last for two weeks, perfectly timed for your next session. At that point, we can decide whether to make any adjustments.”

Lumian briefly acknowledged her words and assessed his mental state.

After more than ten seconds, filled with both fear and anticipation, he inquired, “Is it possible for me to attempt to awaken more buried memories from my subconscious?”

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Chapter 202 - 202 Analysis

202 Analysis

“Of course,” came Susie’s gentle voice, reaching Lumian’s ears.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt a weight pulling at his consciousness, dragging him down swiftly into deeper depths.

Within a matter of seconds, his eyelids grew heavy, and he could not resist the urge to close them. His thoughts became muddled and indistinct.

In his dazed state, Lumian appeared to transform into a spectral figure, floating through the familiar village of Cordu in the cloak of night.

After an unknown duration, he caught sight of the onion-shaped cathedral, though his perception remained hazy. A concentrated beam of light emerged near its main entrance, while the rest of the darkness loomed like an ominous shadow.

Lumian meandered aimlessly toward the adjacent cemetery.

In the darkness, tombstones stood in silent formation, and trees assumed an eerie presence.

A group of men were hauling a lifeless body toward a deep pit, preparing to cast it down.

Beneath the faint glow of the crimson moon, one of the men lifted his head and surveyed his surroundings.

His face, with black hair and piercing blue eyes, bore deep creases, as if shrouded in shadows.

Pons Bénet!

Lumian snapped out of his reverie.

The distance between them diminished instantly. Lumian lowered his gaze and beheld the corpse.

The face of the lifeless body appeared swollen from water, drained of color. The brown hair clung damply to the head, while the brown eyes remained wide open, reflecting agony, indignation, and resentment.

Reimund!

A surge of intense hatred filled Lumian's heart as he hurled accusations at Pons Bénet and his companions, giving vent to his emotions.

It felt as if he had unleashed a torrent of curses, as if he had pounced on Pons Bénet, the villain. It felt as if he was digging a profound pit with his bare hands.

Dirt pierced his nails, uncovering another corpse at the pit's bottom.

The girl's eyes, a shade of lake-blue, bulged fiercely. Her face bore a bluish-purple hue, her mouth agape, and her neck showed evident signs of strangulation. She wore an expression of excruciating pain.

Ava!

Lumian shot up from his seat, propelled by intense emotions, and his eyes flew open.

Huff. Puff. Lumian stared at the vacant sofa opposite him in the booth, gasping heavily.

The intense anger and hatred from his dream lingered, causing him to tremble uncontrollably.

Lumian's face twisted slightly as he replied, his voice filled with pain.

"I saw them. I saw Reimund and Ava's bodies. One of them drowned, and the other appeared to have been strangled to death… Pons Bénet and his gang were burying their bodies in the cemetery next to the cathedral… I shouted at them, wanted to do something… and then I woke up."

Susie listened attentively and spoke calmly.

"This time, I didn't allow you to have a lucid dream. Instead, I let you experience certain subconscious scenes in the form of a dream.

"While it may not present the complete truth, it combines fragments of what actually happened. There might be overlaps in time or space, but the essential details remain intact. It provides us with a basis for interpretation."

Lumian asked, his voice filled with anguish, "So you're saying that I really witnessed Pons Bénet and the others burying Reimund and Ava's bodies in the cemetery?"

"I'm not entirely certain," Susie analyzed. "What we can conclude so far is that Reimund was drowned by Pons Bénet and his companions, and Ava was strangled to death by them. Their bodies were eventually buried somewhere in the cemetery, and you may or may not have been present at the scene. It's possible that you discovered it later and attempted to unearth their corpses as well as seek revenge on Pons Bénet and his gang, but the outcome wasn't favorable. Otherwise, your recent dream would have reflected some of that content."

Lumian fell silent for a moment before speaking again.

“So that’s what happened… I was wondering why Pons Bénet and the others didn’t kill me and toss me into the deep pit if I was truly there…”

Part of his anguish stemmed from a fear deep within him—a suspicion that he might have been in league with Pons and his gang.

“We cannot dismiss the possibility that you were present at the scene and witnessed the entire incident, but there are numerous explanations. It may not be as you imagine it to be. They spared your life because they needed a vessel with exceptional physical attributes.” Susie understood Lumian’s doubts and resistance. Her words aimed to soothe him gently. “What I can affirm is that the anger, hatred, and desire for revenge you experienced in your dream were genuine. Those were your true emotions at that time. In other words, regardless of the circumstances, the deaths of Ava and Reimund have nothing to do with you.”

Upon hearing Susie’s words, Lumian felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He slumped against the sofa, his strength draining away.

His mind was now much calmer than before, and he no longer needed to maintain a facade of bravery.

In the blink of an eye, an invisible warm breeze swept through his body and mind, soothing him completely.

Susie’s encouraging voice filled the air, her smile evident.

“Compared to our last session, you’re in a much better state now. You showed courage sooner than I anticipated, facing the doubts and questions you were reluctant to confront.

“In the realm of psychology, this is a crucial indication that you’re breaking free from the puzzle. Only by directly confronting the problem can you find a resolution.

“Alright, that concludes today’s treatment. You’re ready to face Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, and the others.”

In that very instant, the composed Lumian pondered the words of Madam Magician, recalling her earnest advice.

“There is yet another matter.

“I may be compelled to believe in another entity at some point, but ordinarily, I am forbidden to recollect His honorific name. Do you—either of you—possess a means to prevent such recollection?”

The cheerful female voice responded, her words carrying a gentle smile, “That is quite simple. I shall provide you with a psychological trigger. When your spiritual

intuition feels devoid of protection, your subconscious will replace the honorific name with ‘That Being’ to safeguard against its impact.

“While under protection, you may freely remember and speak His name in its entirety…”

Lumian’s mind turned adrift briefly upon hearing the other person declare, “The psychological cue has been planted.”

“Thank you, Madam. And thank you too, Madam Susie,” Lumian nodded toward the empty space across from the booth.

“You’re welcome. See you in two weeks,” the gentle female voice replied, and Susie added, “See you in two weeks.”

Lumian wasn’t sure when they departed, but the area around Booth D grew still. Only the chirping of birds in the botanical garden, the clopping of hooves on the road, and the distant hum of machinery resonated.

He lifted his cup, finishing the remainder of his Intis coffee in one gulp, adjusting his mental state.

Seizing the moment, he replayed the entire treatment process in his mind, and an inexplicable feeling settled upon him. Madam Susie’s last statement seemed somewhat peculiar.

She said I can face Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, and the others now… Does that imply that the answers I might receive from Madame Pualis could shatter me?

It’s understandable, but what if my condition doesn’t improve as expected? Will she advise me to give up the opportunity to meet Louis Lund? But what if Louis Lund emerged yesterday? Wouldn’t it be a major problem if I hadn’t had my follow up?

If that’s the case, shouldn’t Madam Susie have warned me against approaching Madame Pualis or confronting the padre before the follow-up session?

How can she be so certain that I won’t encounter Louis Lund in the past two weeks, or that he’ll elude capture if I do?

Spectator…

Lumian’s senses snapped back to full alertness. He exited Booth D and hailed a public carriage back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Lumian didn’t rush to send a messenger to Auberge du Coq Doré or the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches to inform Madam Magician about Termiboros. Instead, he made his way straight to 126 Avenue du Marché to check if his subordinates, Anthony Reid, or Franca had discovered anything.

With a dark brown wide-brimmed hat atop his head, Lumian strolled to a spot diagonally across from “Black Scorpion” Roger’s house, roughly 20 meters away. He settled into a gap between two buildings, leaning against the wall.

Several vagrants occupied the area.

One of them shuffled closer to Lumian and whispered, “Nothing yet.”

Lumian nodded and directed his gaze toward the three-story building with a garden, keeping an eye on passersby.

As time ticked by, the sun descended on the horizon, casting a dwindling light. The lamplighters commenced their task, igniting the gas lamps one by one.

At that moment, Lumian spotted a man clad in a grayish-blue worker’s uniform.

Underneath his cap, light-yellow hair peeked out, and his slightly chubby face exuded an air of simplicity and honesty.

Anthony Reid? Why is he out and about? Lumian recognized the information broker, perplexed by his actions.

Resembling a worker finishing his shift, Anthony Reid hurried toward the end of Avenue du Marché.

Lumian’s pupils contracted when he realized that Anthony Reid wasn’t merely passing by; he was approaching someone.

The man sported a blue gown adorned with yellow buttons, a waxed hat, a white tie, and a red vest. He sat inside a rental carriage bearing a yellow plate, clearly a driver affiliated with the Empire Carriage Company. Carriage drivers from different companies donned distinct uniforms.

The carriage driver tipped his hat, keeping his head lowered as if waiting for a customer.

Lumian’s heart stirred. He rose to his feet, taking a few steps in that direction.

As Anthony Reid brushed past the carriage, he stumbled and collided with the horse pulling it.

Startled, the horse attempted to raise its forelegs, but the carriage driver swiftly tugged on the reins, firmly restraining the animal.

Yet, as the carriage driver lifted his head, his face was revealed.

In his forties, with black hair, Lumian couldn’t discern his features clearly due to the distance. Nonetheless, a faint sense of familiarity washed over him.

Lumian narrowed his eyes as he profusely apologized to Anthony Reid and left the carriage behind. A valet emerged from 126 Avenue du Marché.

Approaching the carriage, the valet addressed the driver,

“My master wishes to hire your carriage. Proceed inside and assist with moving some items.”

The carriage driver nodded, replying in a deep voice, “Okay.”

Following the valet, he entered the residence belonging to “Black Scorpion” Roger.

Lumian, who had witnessed the entire sequence of events without catching their conversation, smirked.

He was now utterly certain that the carriage driver was Louis Lund!

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Chapter 203 - 203 Cooperation

203 Cooperation

Lumian retreated to the cluster of tramps, patiently awaiting the emergence of Louis Lund.

Soon enough, Anthony Reid, the information broker, returned after changing his attire, seemingly determined to fulfill his promise and seize an opportunity to tail Louis Lund.

At that moment, he sported a yellowish-white shirt and a brown formal coat. There was no bow tie around his neck, but he wore a round hat, resembling a clerk fresh out of the office.

Had Lumian not possessed a certain knowledge of Reid's build, temperament, and gait, he might have failed to recognize him.

After considering his options, Lumian stepped out from the crevice between the two buildings and confronted Anthony Reid.

Having discarded his disguise upon departing the Valiant Café, he now donned a simple ensemble consisting of black-framed glasses and a broad brown hat. Those familiar with him could effortlessly discern his identity.

Noticing the shift in Anthony Reid's gaze, Lumian whispered as they brushed past each other, "I'm back. Await me at the rear entrance."

Although the Prophecy Spell indicated a reunion with Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché, Lumian aimed to avert any potential mishaps.

On one hand, the Prophetic Concoction derived from his body's response, rendering it somewhat unreliable. There might be omissions within the prophecy. On the other hand, the manifestation of a prophecy could assume various forms, deviating entirely from his anticipated sequence of events.

Anthony Reid withdrew his gaze and nodded, signifying his comprehension.

He advanced onward, passing by the residence of "Black Scorpion" Roger, and disappearing into the distance down an alley.

Lumian did not immediately turn around. Beneath the glow of street lamps, he pressed onward.

Just as he reached a dimly lit section, a figure emerged from the shadows beneath a dilapidated, iron-black street lamp in the alley ahead.

The towering individual, garbed in a form-fitting black robe with a hood that nearly concealed the face, beckoned to Lumian.

Franca? Lumian instantly formed a conjecture and hastened towards her.

The conspicuously dressed character was indeed “Red Boots” Franca.

This time, she had forgone her trademark red boots in favor of black ones.

“Aren’t you concerned about being discovered?” Lumian couldn’t help but inquire.

While Trieriens had a high tolerance for eccentric attire and even actively pursued fashion trends, loitering in secrecy while dressed in such a manner would undoubtedly draw the attention of “Black Scorpion” Roger and the Poison Spur Mob—even the passing laborers!

Franca grinned nonchalantly and retorted, “You don’t understand. This is all part of the procedure! Didn’t your sister teach you?”

Indeed, she did teach me, but she never mentioned employing it in such a place or situation… Before Lumian could utter another word, Franca waved her hand dismissively.

“Fret not, I won’t be discovered.”

As her words faded, she took a step backward, merging seamlessly with the shadow and vanishing from Lumian’s sight.

If it weren’t for the inevitable gender change at Sequence 7, he would have considered this path more to his liking than that of the Hunter.

Emerging from the shadows once more, Franca pointed toward 126 Avenue du Marché in the distance.

“That carriage driver should be the Louis Lund you seek. Shall I assist you in tailing him later?

“I understand that Hunters possess a hound’s nose and eagle’s eyes, making them adept at tracking, but you struggle with concealment. Staying too far away risks losing the target, while staying too close risks discovery. It’s safer if I handle it.

“Don’t forget, Louis Lund is also a Beyonder, and he worships an evil god. It’s possible he possesses unique abilities.”

This time, Lumian didn’t resist or reject the offer. He nodded and replied, “Very well.”

At present, he couldn't mark Louis Lund with a distinct scent, and darkness was swiftly descending. The crowded streets, filled with pedestrians and carriages, would muddle any traces. Tailing from 20 to 30 meters away could easily result in losing the target with the slightest misstep.

Franca's thin, red lips curled into a visible smile, free from the confines of the hooded shadow, as she spoke,"Your afternoon therapy session was quite effective. A man should be more open-minded, untroubled by trivial matters."

She lightly tapped her chest as she spoke.

From her possession emerged a glass bottle.

The surface of the small bottle had been intricately etched into small squares, reflecting the nearby streetlamp's light and shimmering with psychedelic colors.

"When I lived as a man, I found these perfume bottles to be beautifully crafted, but I felt too self-conscious to buy them or carry them with me. Now, I have no such concerns. Sometimes, changing your gender can open the door to a new world," Franca said with emotion.

The door to a new world refers to sleeping with men? If it weren't for the crucial task of tracking Louis Lund, Lumian would definitely have provided such a rejoinder.

Opening the lid, she brought the pressed glass bottle to Lumian's nose.

"Remember its scent."

The perfume was refreshing and natural, akin to strolling through a forest on a summer's day.

"Got it." Lumian nodded slightly.

Franca proceeded to spray it on herself.

"It has distinct top, middle, and base notes, but the differences are subtle. There's no need to discern them specifically. You'll know it by the scent alone.

"I'll position myself three to four meters away from Louis Lund. Without a hound's nose, he won't detect this fragrance that clearly doesn't belong to the market district."

Lumian added thoughtfully, "So, I am to track your perfume from a distance of ten to twenty meters?"

It was indeed a clever strategy.

"That's correct." Franca produced a handful of fluorescent powder, sprinkling it over herself, and recited a deep incantation.

It appeared to be a fusion of the Hermes words for “hidden” and “body.”

Almost instantaneously, Lumian witnessed Franca’s form gradually fading away, as if an eraser were obliterating a pencil drawing.

Apart from the lingering fragrance in his nostrils, he had completely lost track of the Witch.

Once again, Lumian marveled at the Demoness path’s performance as a Low- to Mid-Sequence Beyonder.

In the blink of an eye, Lumian felt the fragrance’s source receding, drawing closer to the three-story building with a garden at 126 Avenue du Marché.

Lumian made his way in that direction, slipping into the shadows and pressing himself against the wall.

After nearly half an hour, a man named Louis Lund emerged, dressed in a red vest, blue uniform, white tie, and waxed hat. Accompanying him was “Black Scorpion” Roger, impeccably attired in a formal suit with neatly combed black hair.

One of them took the reins of the carriage, while the other entered inside.

Why is “Black Scorpion” Roger following him? Is he planning to meet Madame Pualis in person? Lumian furrowed his brow in slight confusion.

This introduced new variables to his plan.

Originally, Lumian intended to find an opportune moment during Louis Lund’s return journey. With his current strength, he could easily overpower his target, even if they were both Sequence 8s. Plus, he had the assistance of Witch Franca.

However, if “Black Scorpion” Roger joined the equation, things would become considerably more troublesome.

From the midwife’s performance in his dream, Lumian deduced that a Heretic Spellmaster possessed numerous mystical techniques and considerable power. They were fully capable of matching a Witch from the Assassin pathway.

While Lumian could have Franca distract “Black Scorpion” Roger while he dealt with Louis Lund, the battle between two Mid-Sequence Beyonders wouldn’t be swift, thus increasing the risk of discovery.

Hmm… If “Black Scorpion” Roger truly intends to meet Madame Pualis, I’ll follow him instead of attacking. My objective is to locate Madame Pualis and establish contact with her. Lumian swiftly revised his plan and devised a new strategy.

The rental carriage began its journey toward the opposite end of Avenue du Marché, and the refreshing, natural fragrance faded away.

Lumian hurried along beside the gas street lamps, maintaining a distance of nearly 20 meters.

After a while, he sensed the perfume come to a halt. Advancing another ten meters, he witnessed the rental carriage pulling over by the roadside. “Black Scorpion” Roger disembarked, carrying a wooden box.

Not far away stood Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Within a matter of seconds, Louis Lund directed the carriage toward a fork in the road, bypassing the bustling area. Meanwhile, “Black Scorpion” Roger ventured into the market alone.

Is Madame Pualis at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman? Or is “Black Scorpion” Roger merely escorting Louis Lund for a distance, concerned about potential targeting? Lumian speculated as he hastened forward.

Regardless, capturing Louis Lund took precedence!

Behind Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, there were only a few pedestrians. Under the pitch-black sky, occasionally, one could spot a lone figure.

Several street lamps here were out of order, leaving the road engulfed in darkness. It was wide enough for several carriages to pass side by side.

Lumian surveyed the surroundings, wasting no time. He removed his black-framed glasses and sprinted forward.

Before long, he caught up with the slowly moving carriage. As Louis Lund sensed the anomaly, he pushed down on the carriage with his left hand and lunged toward the driver’s seat.

From this distance, Lumian could clearly see the black-haired, blue-eyed face.

Though the other party had employed some disguise, Lumian was certain it was Louis Lund!

Reacting swiftly, Louis Lund, without bothering to ascertain the assailant’s identity or motives, seized the reins with his left hand and balled his right hand into a fist. Like a speeding cannonball, he launched an attack at Lumian, who was suspended in midair with no leverage to defend himself.

In that very moment, Louis Lund caught sight of Lumian’s unmasked face, his eyes widening in sheer shock.

Undeterred, Lumian didn’t evade the blow. Instead, he extended his right arm and caught hold of Louis Lund’s fist.

Just as the impending collision seemed inevitable, Lumian retracted his arm, lessening the force behind the strike. Then, with a swift motion, he intertwined

Louis Lund's fists, wrists, and forearms as though he had boneless limbs. As a result, Louis Lund was sent flying backward but remained within the confines of the carriage.

In the blink of an eye, Louis Lund saw a smile on Lumian's face.

Whack!

Franca materialized on the opposite side of the carriage driver's seat, her palm poised to strike Louis Lund's ear.

Under the formidable Beyonder powers unleashed by an Assassin's full-strength blow, Louis Lund succumbed to unconsciousness without uttering a single sound.

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Chapter 204 - 204 Interrogation

204 Interrogation

With a swift movement, Lumian used the force of Louis Lund's fall to gracefully land in the spot where the carriage driver had been stationed.

Franca had already taken over from Louis Lund, expertly maneuvering the horse and bringing the carriage to a halt by the darkened roadside.

Their coordination was flawless, even without prior communication. One focused on the front while the other ambushed from behind. In a matter of seconds, they managed to overpower Louis Lund, a powerful Beyonder at Sequence 8.

"Carry him into the carriage," Franca instructed, her experience evident as she contemplated the subsequent course of action.

Lumian didn't object and lifted Louis Lund into the rented four-wheeled carriage.

Franca followed suit, closing the carriage door behind her. Then, she removed her hood and black robe, seemingly preparing to change into more comfortable attire upon returning home.

Halfway through her task, she caught Lumian's puzzled gaze and snapped out of her reverie. Awkwardly, she instructed, "Turn around."

Lumian could deduce Franca's intentions and quickly obliged, diverting his gaze out the window to allow her the privacy she required.

A rustling sound continued for over a minute behind him.

"I'm done," Franca's clear voice reached his ears.

The rental carriage wasn't particularly spacious. Lumian, standing at over 1.8 meters tall, hunched over slightly and turned back.

Franca now wore a red vest, a white tie, and a blue gown adorned with a row of yellow buttons. Holding a waxed hat and a horsewhip, she presented an unusual blend of mismatched elements—an absurd and peculiar beauty—with her sharp nose, slightly flamboyant brown eyebrows, thin red lips, and vivid lake-colored eyes.

"Quite swift, Miss Franca," Lumian praised, acknowledging her as the "new" driver for the Empire Carriage Company.

“That’s professionalism for you! If these buttons hadn’t been so time-consuming, I could have been even faster,” Franca muttered as she tucked her flaxen-colored hair beneath the waxed hat.

With her disguise complete, she retrieved an eyebrow pencil and other items she carried and quickly applied some simple makeup. Her complexion darkened, and her eyebrows were made to appear untidy, successfully transforming her into an ordinary-looking man who wouldn’t attract undue attention in the dimly lit streets illuminated by the crimson moon and streetlamps.

“I’ll be the carriage driver. You interrogate him,” Franca declared, opening the door and hopping out to assume Louis Lund’s former seat.

She took hold of the reins and guided the horse to turn slowly.

Satisfied that the rental carriage was moving steadily, Lumian assisted Louis Lund to the opposite seat. Extracting a bottle of truth serum he had obtained from the unscrupulous Hedsey, he compelled Louis to consume a third of it.

As the drug began to take effect, Lumian resisted the urge to wake the unconscious Louis Lund with the ritual silver dagger. Instead, he gently prodded the area between the bridge of the nose and lips, tugged at a strand of his hair, and lightly tickled his nostrils with the strand. Gradually, Louis Lund stirred from his slumber.

Throughout this process, Lumian maintained a friendly and non-threatening posture, refraining from dislocating his captive’s joints or binding his hands and feet.

Achoo!

Louis Lund sneezed and abruptly awakened from his slumber.

He glanced across at Lumian, who sat at ease with a smile playing on his lips.

“Stay calm,” Lumian reassured, his smile unwavering as he pressed his right palm down. “If I intended you harm, stray dogs would have already feasted upon you.”

Louis Lund’s immediate impulse was to employ his powers and make a swift escape. Yet, as he recalled being attacked from behind, he cautiously peered out of the carriage window.

The distant light merged with the surrounding shadows, amplifying the hushed whispers of wheels and hooves upon the road.

Reluctant to gamble on mounting a counterattack, Louis Lund inquired in a low, grave voice, “What is it that you want?”

From his vantage point, Lumian hadn’t taken any measures to restrain him, confident in the belief that escape was futile.

The other party may have been careless or vulnerable, presenting an opportunity for Louis Lund to exploit. But such an advantage would never manifest in a direct confrontation.

And the aid accompanying Lumian could strike from the shadows undetected—a force to be reckoned with!

Lumian smiled. “I merely seek to reunite with an old friend.”

Louis Lund, dressed only in a linen shirt and shorts, replied with a dark expression, “I won’t succumb to your threats again. Madame is already aware of my past transgressions and has granted me forgiveness.”

So I really possessed incriminating information about you? Lumian’s mind momentarily swirled with confusion.

Recollections from his dream emerged—a revelation of Louis Lund engaging in an illicit affair with a woman from the village, clandestinely selling portions of the administrator’s castle collection in a bid to blackmail him for knowledge of Madame Pualis’s involvement with the padre.

In retrospect, those accounts might have been fallacious.

If the padre truly harbored desires for Madame Pualis, it made little sense for him to forsake belief in the evil god symbolizing bountiful harvests, or to forgo birthing several children with her.

Lumian suspected that his dream had crafted an R-rated adaptation of the concealed conflict between the two factions. After all, both the padre and Madame Pualis had numerous lovers, making it easy for his subconscious to forge connections.

Compared to the secrets housed within Madame Pualis’s castle, Louis Lund’s affair and the pilfering of collections appeared as innocuous as mundane meals thrice daily. There was no ground for him to be subjected to blackmail.

Yet here stood Louis Lund, insisting that he had indeed erred and fallen victim to Lumian’s coercion.

“Is that so?” Lumian adopted his Cordu Prankster King persona. “I merely assisted you in concealing your missteps. How can that be construed as a threat?”

Louis Lund erupted in a bitter laugh, a mix of anger and disbelief.

“You are the most shameless individual I have ever encountered.

“I am aware that you uncovered certain irregularities and sought to discern their origins, but you did indeed threaten me and extract information about Madame.”

“That’s correct. In those days, I entertained the thought of betraying Madame and seeking the padre’s assistance. However, that was because I hadn’t comprehended the greatness of Mother. I was still a follower of the false god, the Eternal Blazing Sun. Now, my life stems from Mother, and my future belongs to Mother.”

Ah, so that’s how it is… I must thank this truth serum. You’ve spilled all that needed to be said, both the necessary and the unnecessary. I didn’t have to wrack my brain to gather information… In reality, I sensed something amiss in the village and embarked on a certain investigation? Lumian nodded, satisfied, and smiled. “When did you come to realize the greatness of Mother? Was it after you gave birth to that child?”

Louis Lund looked utterly stunned, his reaction almost causing him to jolt upright and bang his head. “How did you know about me birthing a child? How could you possibly know?”

Hmm… So I wasn’t involved in the padre’s raid on the administrator’s castle? Otherwise, Louis Lund wouldn’t be posing such a question… Lumian felt a surge of delight and jestingly responded, “When I undressed you earlier, I noticed stretch marks and a C-section scar on your stomach.”

“Impossible!” Louis Lund fiercely objected. “Madame has already erased them!”

Lumian swiftly changed the course of their conversation and inquired with curiosity,

“I’m curious to know how Madame Pualis managed to impregnate you.”

Louis Lund, though initially hesitant to answer, couldn’t resist the urge to divulge the secret.

“Whether it’s a man or a woman, as long as you engage in intimate relations with her and exchange bodily fluids, she can conceive a child according to her desires.”

I see… Lumian breathed a sigh of relief.

His greatest concern had been the possibility of Madame Pualis employing her Beyonder abilities to remotely impregnate him.

“So, both men and women will do, but what about animals?” Lumian pressed on.

Louis Lund was taken aback by the question. After a few moments, he responded, “That should work too…”

“And what about plants? Or rocks?” Lumian’s inquiry turned scholarly.

“I… I don’t know,” Louis Lund admitted, unable to provide a definitive answer.

Madame has never contemplated such possibilities. Why does this youngster possess such a vivid imagination?

Regretfully, Lumian changed the subject.

“Since you conceived through the exchange of bodily fluids, how did you end up with that bird’s nest-like thing in your stomach?”

“How do you know about it? When did you see it?” Louis Lund asked, astonished.

“I’ll tell you later,” Lumian swiftly lied, maintaining his composure without a flicker of hesitation.

Louis Lund wore a perplexed expression as he muttered, his face clouded with confusion, “It came along with the conception of the child. It’s like a fruit. The outer layer is the epidermis, and the fetus is the pulp. They were once joined together and only split open when ripe.”

“Sounds quite magical. That bird’s nest seems to possess great spiritual value. Can it be utilized in the realm of mysticism?” Lumian deliberately rambled, skillfully diverting the conversation away from his true intentions.

“It serves as a key ingredient in a certain healing potion,” Louis Lund continued, speaking without pause. “It has various other uses as well, like enhancing the condition of human skin and providing power to spells…”

After he finished, Lumian let out a nonchalant sigh.

“Did your first child perish in the padre’s assault on the castle?”

“Yes, he was still so young,” Louis Lund lamented the loss of life. “During that time, the padre had many followers with him. We kept retreating, and a few Gardeners and a Heretic Spellmaster lost their lives. If Madam hadn’t returned in time, we wouldn’t have escaped. Sigh, all those children were killed.”

“How many people did the padre bring?” Lumian casually inquired, concealing his true concerns.

Louis Lund recollected and replied, “Some were shepherds originally, like Pierre Berry, Niort Best, and the others. Some were the padre’s mistresses, such as Sybil Berry, Madonna Bénet, and Philippa Guillaume. The rest were Pons Bénet and his gang. We managed to kill a few of them, including the rather formidable Niort Best…”

In my dream, Niort Best was slain by the three sheep… So in reality, he died during the raid on the administrator’s castle? And I wasn’t among the individuals mentioned by Louis Lund… In other words, the battle scenes I witnessed were derived from a fragment of my soul? Thus, they are incomplete and unable to reveal the full picture and all the participants… Lumian felt a sense of relief and smiled as he asked, “Where did Madame Pualis go?”

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Chapter 205 - 205 Banshee

205 Banshee

Louis Lund shook his head.

“I’ve got no idea, but when Madame came back, she wasn’t well either.”

“Then she saw the castle in ruins and the important items destroyed. She gathered the remaining ones and prepared to leave Cordu.”

Based on what I witnessed, it seems that Madame Pualis had indeed been engaged in a fight with someone else. Lumian asked with curiosity, “Why didn’t Madame Pualis try to bring the dead back to life?”

Louis Lund looked at Lumian, surprised.

“I never told you any of that…”

In other words, he wanted to know how Lumian had this knowledge.

Lumian smiled but offered no explanation.

Louis Lund couldn’t contain his urge to spill the secret.

“Madame can resurrect the dead and restore their bodies, but it’s far from perfect. The resurrected ones aren’t quite human anymore. They’re part corpse, part monster. They only retain fragments of their original memories and can only exist for seven days.”

Madame Pualis’s resurrection ability is severely flawed at this level… Lumian was disappointed.

He diverted the topic.

“What did Madame Pualis want in Cordu?”

Louis Lund looked puzzled. “Didn’t I already tell you?”

Lumian was prepared and smiled as he replied, “Given what happened afterward, I believe you might have a different perspective now.”

Louis Lund felt the need to share the information, so he sighed and said, “Back then, I couldn’t comprehend it. I was even scared. That’s why I dropped hints to the padre during Mass, hoping for assistance.”

“Yes… I later discovered that Madame wanted to create an entirely new world in Cordu. In this world, when humans die, their souls return to the earth and roam the wilderness. On special occasions, they can return home and experience the joy of reunion. By redeeming their sins, they can be reborn, emerging from the Mother’s womb as human fetuses.”

“Paramita?” Lumian remembered the term from his dream.

“Yes!” Louis Lund replied, fear evident in his eyes.

He suspected that Lumian had asked the question to gauge his reaction.

Lumian knew the correct answer and sought to determine if Louis Lund was lying or how much of his story was false.

He could only inquire about it from Louis Lund, not Madame Pualis.

Louis Lund shook his head slowly.

“Madame briefly mentioned it, but it was very vague.

“She said she had only established a small, caricature Paramita, a part of the complete Paramita. She also mentioned that by creating her own Paramita, she could please the Mother and bear more.”

A part? What would happen if those Madames managed to create a complete Paramita? Lumian wondered if constructing a miniature Paramita was a prerequisite for their unusual path towards godhood.

He gazed at Louis Lund, attempting to inquire, “What is Madame Pualis’s Sequence now?”

“Madame’s condition is rather peculiar. It might be related to the destruction of her Paramita or something else she possesses,” Louis Lund replied, catching himself mid-sentence.

Why can’t I control my words? Why did I say what I shouldn’t have?

Louis Lund realized that his behavior had likely been influenced by one of Lumian Lee’s Beyonder powers.

Now understanding the cause, he no longer blamed himself or felt anxious. He felt a sense of relief and relaxation.

“Madame should be somewhere between Sequence 5 and Sequence 4. At times, she exudes an imposing aura that makes people afraid to meet her gaze. Other times, she lacks such grandeur.”

It’s reminiscent of the state Madame Pualis displayed in my dream… Lumian recalled and stated, “Sequence 9 Villain, Sequence 8 Gardener, Sequence 7

Heretic Spellmaster, Sequence 6 Sower… What comes after Sequence 5? And what about Sequence 4? What lies beyond that?"

He knows more than I anticipated… Witnessing Lumian Lee divulge so much information about the pathway's Sequences in one go, Louis Lund didn't dare take any risks. Yielding to his desire to confide in him, he responded, "Banshee is Sequence 5, and Evil Overlord, also known as Benevolent Overlord or Madame, is Sequence 4. I don't know what lies beyond that. I'm merely a Gardener. I don't possess the right to receive any further boons and advance to become a Heretic Spellmaster."

Banshee… The name implies a change in gender… Pulitt became Pualis… Titles like Madame Moon and Madame Night symbolize godhood and demigods, but Madame Pualis doesn't precisely fit the role of Madame Night… Lumian pondered for a moment before steering the conversation back to Cordu.

"Were Madame Pualis's initial followers in the village mostly lovers and the elderly?"

"That's correct," Louis Lund affirmed, nodding. "People like Naroka, who were quite old, yearned deeply for their departed loved ones. They longed to see them again and worry about what awaits them after death. They experience both fear and longing. That's the aid Madame can provide them. Unfortunately, Naroka passed away suddenly before fully embracing Paramita. Madame suspects that she discovered the padre's scheme and was killed by her youngest son, who follows the padre."

That explains it… Lumian gained new insight into Naroka's death from his dream.

Her demise was the result of being silenced.

Ava and Reimund likely met the same fate.

Sighing, Lumian changed the subject.

"When did you realize something was amiss with the padre?"

Louis Lund contemplated for a moment and replied, "In early January, I caught sight of the children in the castle tower. You can't fathom what it was like. To put it briefly, it terrified me and nearly drove me insane. I was desperate to leave Madame.

"Initially, I believed she was just like those mystical fanatics who enjoy purchasing magazines like Psychic and Lotus and engaging in futile practices. I didn't think there was anything wrong. However, as time went on, I noticed that the other residents of the castle were becoming increasingly peculiar. The administrator locked himself and Madame in their rooms on two separate occasions, coinciding with the birth of a child each time. My valets and maids often did the same, and Madame was remarkably understanding of their behavior.

“From time to time, the distant cries of a baby reached my ears, causing deep suspicion to well up within me. Seizing the opportunity presented by Madame’s absence and the others’ lack of vigilance, I stealthily slipped into the tower. Oh, Mother, the sight that greeted me was utterly terrifying!”

Louis Lund, originally intending to speak of Guillaume Bénet’s abnormal behavior, found himself unable to contain his thoughts on the castle tower incident, and he began to ramble.

Lumian could vividly imagine the scene, for he had witnessed it in his dream: human children with bird-like claws, sprawled against the walls, densely packed and scattered throughout.

Louis Lund gulped nervously and continued his account, “I initially dropped hints to the padre during Mass. Later, I took the opportunity to reveal Madame’s abnormality to him. I suspected she might be a follower of an evil deity. He instructed me to keep it hidden and not expose myself, assuring me that he would handle the situation.

“It was around mid-January when things took a turn for the worse. The padre continued his normal routine as if nothing was amiss. Despite my repeated urging, you eventually discovered the truth and threatened me.

“After that, Sewell, the carriage driver, and I received a revelation. We repented and wholeheartedly pledged ourselves to Madame.

“Then, in March, the padre suddenly launched an attack on the castle with a group of people.”

Louis Lund has limited knowledge about the padre’s situation. When Lumian inquired further about what had transpired in Cordu, Louis Lund seemed unfamiliar with the village’s circumstances. This aligned with his role as the castle’s butler, primarily tending to matters in Dariège and other cities.

He only mentioned that since January, the villagers of Cordu had been frequently discussing horoscopes, believing that it would bring them glory and alter their destinies. Prior to that, they merely followed certain folk traditions to ward off any changes in their fate. Specific discussions regarding these matters were rare.

With the understanding that former administrator Béost and Madame Pualis’s lady’s maid, Cathy, were now Heretic Spellmasters, and that Madame Pualis had left Cordu before Lent, Lumian realized he wouldn’t glean any more information from Louis Lund.

Knowing when to stop, Lumian posed a direct question, “Where does Madame Pualis reside now?”

“In Quartier de No?l…” Louis Lund instinctively moved to cover his mouth but added another detail. “Rue de Scotch Broom…”

Rue de Scotch Broom in Quartier de No?l… A map of Trier from a magazine article flashed through Lumian's mind.

Quartier de No?l lay northeast of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, divided by the Srenzo River. It was renowned for its numerous hospitals, including the Veterans' Home and Wounded Soldiers' Hospital. Additionally, being situated in the suburbs, it boasted a fair share of farmland.

Lumian refrained from pressuring Louis Lund or intensifying his desire to extract more information. Instead, he smiled and said, "I bear no ill intentions towards Madame. I merely wish to speak with her about the events in Cordu.

"I will allow you to depart. Please inform Madame Pualis that if she is willing to meet with me, she can choose the time and place. Ah, please send your response to Room 302, 9 Rue des Pavés, Quartier du Jardin Botanique, before tomorrow night."

It was a safe house Lumian had prepared in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, and now it would finally serve its purpose.

Louis Lund let out a sigh of relief before responding cautiously, "Got it."

Anxious thoughts plagued him, fearing that Lumian might allow him to depart only to trail behind him. Yet, considering Lumian's evident capability to uncover Madame's precise whereabouts without pressing the issue, Louis Lund found himself compelled to place his trust in Lumian's amicability.

He then gestured towards his shorts and remarked, "I cannot leave dressed like this."

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Chapter 206 - 206 Communication

206 Communication

Lumian's head pounded at the mere thought of Franca coming in and undressing. He scrutinized Louis Lund, who was left in a linen shirt and white shorts, and offered a genuine suggestion.

"I can ask my companion to return the money from your coat. Leave the carriage as it is and find a clothing store. Tell them you encountered a twisted robber. I'm certain everyone in Trier will understand."

Louis Lund's expression froze for a moment as he pointed downwards from Lumian's current position. "I have spare clothes."

Lumian bent down and retrieved a black formal suit with a vest and bow tie.

It seemed to be Louis Lund's usual attire as a butler.

"Is this rental carriage truly yours?" Lumian inquired curiously as he tossed the formal suit to Louis Lund.

"I rented the clothes and the carriage." Louis Lund hurriedly put on his pants.

Lumian sat there, patiently waiting for him to dress before calling out to Franca to stop the carriage by the roadside.

He opened the door, turned around, and waved at Louis Lund.

"Hope to see you again."

If not, I'll find you on Rue de Scotch Broom in Quartier de No?l. And if you've already vanished, I'll continue my investigation, ensuring you'll never find peace.

Lumian would have trailed Louis Lund until he tracked down Madame Pualis if it weren't for his caution regarding her abilities and characteristics, as well as his intention to engage in a friendly conversation with her.

Franca placed the waxed hat and whip on the driver's seat of the carriage, picked up the black robe beside her, and put it on. Then, she pulled up her hood and leaped into the shadows by the road.

Once Louis Lund steered the carriage away from the street, she emerged from the shadows and approached Lumian. She gazed in his direction and spoke. "Not following him?"

“No need. For now, we’re not enemies.” Lumian averted his gaze and headed towards Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Franca followed, a smile gracing her lips.

“Aren’t you concerned that Madame Pualis might refuse to see you and disappear overnight?”

Lumian and Louis Lund didn’t purposely lower their voices during their exchange. An assassin possessed sharp ears and eyes, so she caught most of their conversation. While she couldn’t fully grasp the Cordu-related details due to her lack of prior knowledge, she gleaned plenty about other topics.

For instance, Lumian sought an audience with Madame Pualis. For instance, a certain evil god’s pathway would transform into a Banshee at Sequence 5…

Lumian took two deep breaths to calm his lingering, trembling emotions.

“I simply believe it’s more likely to meet Madame Pualis if I display friendliness rather than tailing Louis Lund.

“She knows full well whom I seek revenge against. Her own castle was damaged by the padre and she was driven out of Cordu. I refuse to believe she bears no grudge.

“Heh heh, I did kill two leaders of the Poison Spur Mob and tamper with ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger’s coffee, but they don’t know Lumian Lee was behind it. There’s no conflict between hating Ciel and meeting Lumian Lee.”

Franca couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You’re right. What does their vendetta against Ciel have to do with you, Lumian?”

She murmured to herself, lost in thought, “What’s Madame Pualis’s connection to the Poison Spur Mob? Which evil deity does the Banshee pathway belong to? Are ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger, ‘Baldy’ Harman, and ‘Short-legged Candlestick’ Castina associated with this pathway? One Spellmaster Heretic and two Gardeners?”

She speculated based on her understanding of the Poison Spur Mob.

Lumian didn’t hold back any information.

“The mastermind behind the Poison Spur Mob is Madame Moon, but it seems she has recently made further progress. She and Madame Night, whom Pualis represents, are part of a secret organization called the Nightstalkers. They worship the Great Mother. I don’t know the precise name, nor do I dare to utter it.”

The concealed entity known as Inevitability could corrupt people merely by knowing about it. The Great Mother, even more sinister and fearsome than

Inevitability, had her followers locked in a prolonged conflict against the Blessed of Inevitability in Cordu. So, she was certainly capable of doing the same.

Lumian suspected that if he were to learn the Great Mother's complete and honorific name, there was a high chance he would become pregnant on the spot.

Franca found herself deeply intrigued.

"Indeed, it's best not to seek knowledge beyond one's boundaries.

"There was once a member of our research society who enjoyed delving into secrets and acquiring all kinds of mystical knowledge. Eventually, he vanished and was never seen again."

Franca pragmatically shifted the topic to "Black Scorpion" Roger and the others, along with their respective abilities. Lumian provided detailed explanations. After all, he still had to rely on Madame Hidden Blade to combat the Poison Spur Mob.

When Lumian speculated that one of the abilities of a Sower was to impregnate others, Franca felt a momentary envy and eagerly exclaimed, "If Gardner were to become pregnant, it would be quite interesting…"

"Madame, your thoughts are perilous. I truly worry that you might embrace the mantra of 'Life is short, why not give it a try?' and end up choosing to believe in that Great Mother, praying for Her to bestow upon you the power of a Sower," Lumian mockingly warned.

The combination of a Demoness and a Sower was too wicked. Trier would undoubtedly witness a large number of victims.

Franca was taken aback.

"I've already consumed a potion and become a Beyonder. I can't accept any more boons, can I…?"

You don't know? That's fortunate! Lumian sincerely replied, "I don't believe so."

"Don't worry. I possess extensive knowledge of mysticism and understand that every evil deity harbors malicious intentions." Franca sighed softly, setting an example for herself.

She glanced over at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman nearby and casually remarked, "When I was waiting for Louis Lund earlier today, I witnessed an unlucky fellow."

Unlucky fellow? Lumian's heart stirred as he recollected.

"Was he a slender man in his fifties with blond hair and blue eyes?"

"How did you know?" Franca was taken aback. "He was strolling along the street when a vase suddenly dropped from the balcony above and struck his head. He

reacted swiftly, managing to dodge to the side of the road. However, he stumbled on the edge of the curb and lost his balance. At that very moment, a public carriage was about to collide with him. Heh heh, he's certainly no ordinary person. Despite the circumstances, he evaded it with a remarkably nimble move. And then, guess what? He collided with a gas street lamp pole, causing his nose to bleed."

After recounting the humorous scene she had witnessed that afternoon, Franca turned her gaze to Lumian, awaiting his response to her inquiry.

Lumian paused, contemplating her question.

"That individual should be Monsieur Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré. He is in cahoots with the pervert known as Hedsey, who attacked Jenna.

"I suspect he is a Beyonder. I had previously informed the Eternal Blazing Sun Church of the anomaly through intermediaries, but they found nothing amiss. Recently, I acquired a Bad Luck charm and seized an opportunity to use it on him. I intended for him to experience frequent misfortunes and thereby expose his abnormality.

"Unfortunately, his performance went unnoticed by official Beyonders."

But given that tramp's luck, Monsieur Ive would likely suffer from misfortune for another two or three days.

Franca's expression darkened as she stated, "Indeed, it's clear that he is a Beyonder.

"So, it's the group that attacked Jenna… You should have informed me earlier! I could have found someone to help draw greater attention from the authorities to this fellow named Ive!"

Recalling the eradicated mirror people, Lumian focused on the depraved Hedsey, Monsieur Ive, Susanna Mattise, and Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

"The abilities of their pathway are quite intriguing…" Franca couldn't help but sigh. "When I first delved into mysticism, everyone told me that there were only twenty-two divine pathways. However, in the past two to three years, peculiar Sequences have occasionally emerged. Do evil gods fall outside the realm of divine pathways?"

After a brief pause, Franca said to Lumian, "I will report this to the authorities through my contacts, but we mustn't be careless. Remember, always remain vigilant and be prepared for any unforeseen circumstances. Indeed, when the time comes, we may have to collaborate and take action. I will inform you once we have communicated.

"Not bad. Now you know how to seek assistance from me. Don't fret; when I find myself in trouble, I will come to you."

"Okay." Lumian nodded gently.

…

After bidding Franca farewell, Lumian made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

He still remembered the issue with Termiboros. Once inside Room 207, he retrieved the memo and read it carefully before composing a letter to Madam Magician.

In the letter, he primarily addressed two concerns. Firstly, he detailed the temptation and subsequent influence of Termiboros upon receiving the Alms Monk boon. Secondly, he informed Madam Magician that he had sought assistance from the Psychiatrist and could now avoid reciting the corresponding honorific name.

Thanks to Monsieur Ive hiring a regular cleaning lady, the motel had become less infested with bedbugs. Lumian swiftly tidied up the surroundings, arranged the altar, and summoned the doll-like blond messenger.

The messenger surveyed the room and seemed satisfied with Lumian's decision to change the summoning location.

Approximately thirty minutes later, she materialized in Room 207 and placed the reply on the wooden table. Tilting her chin slightly, she addressed Lumian, "You should be grateful. I helped remind Madam Magician and ensured she read your letter promptly."

"Thank you," Lumian replied reflexively, momentarily caught off guard.

It was only after the messenger had departed that Lumian snapped out of his daze. He picked up the neatly folded square letter and unfolded it.

"I am pleased to hear that your treatment is proving effective. I did not expect that entity to dispatch an angel. What a significant investment.

"In recent years, evil gods have indeed been infiltrating more frequently, but it remains challenging for higher-level powers to enter our world. The number of angels can be counted on one hand. Three of them were destroyed in transit, causing only a small area of corruption. While one succeeded, an orthodox god intervened and rectified the situation.

"In other words, you are the only unfortunate individual in the entire world."

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Chapter 207 - 207 Organization

207 Organization

Lumian paid no mind to Madam Magician's usual playful jabs and instead focused on her account of the evil god's infiltration.

It aligned with the information shared by the late "Hammer" Ait.

For unrecognized evil gods hailing from other realms, providing godhood boons proved to be an arduous task. Numerous obstacles hindered Their progress. They had to rely on covert followers to perform elaborate rituals on a grand scale, which often drew attention and resulted in swift annihilation before they could infiltrate.

Madam Magician painstakingly detailed various examples, showcasing the immense difficulty angelic entities faced when descending into the mortal plane. In recent years, there had been only five instances, with four failures and one partial success. While gaining a measure of godhood without reaching angelic status seemed somewhat easier, such cases were rare and generally unsuccessful.

Though Madam Magician didn't explicitly mention it, Lumian suspected that the Great Mother, the Mother Tree of Desire, and the enigmatic fog possessed extraordinary infiltration capabilities, surpassing other entities based on "Hammer" Ait. It seemed likely that these three were responsible for most successful instances involving the acquisition of godhood powers.

Does Madam Magician remain unaware or does she deem it unnecessary for me to know at this stage? Lumian pondered momentarily, inclined to believe the latter.

He continued perusing Madam Magician's response.

"This actually bodes well. Dealing with an angel who serves a hidden entity is much simpler than confronting angelic powers derived from said hidden entity. The associated risks are also significantly reduced.

"Once you ascend to the rank of an angel and extract powers of equal magnitude from that fellow with the long name, thereby rendering Him exceedingly vulnerable, you can implore my Lord to undo the seal and set Him free. Then, you can give Him a thorough thrashing and either transform Him into a Sealed Artifact or restore Him to His original Beyonder characteristics.

"Naturally, this hinges upon Him truly being an angelic entity and not a puppet blessed with a boon. Puppets are easier to handle. Once you extract a certain measure of His power, He will crumble. However, the remaining power bearing the mark of the hidden entity is what presents a greater challenge. You must

maintain the seal and gradually absorb it until it reaches a level manageable by an angel.

“Doesn’t it all seem to be progressing smoothly with a high likelihood of success? Ah, but the most vexing and formidable step lies in becoming an angel.

“In your present state, I lack confidence. Were it not for the uniqueness of the current era, 99% or more of the Beyonders would never come close to touching godhood.

“I believe your Psychiatrist has already enlightened you on how to evade the negative effects of Termiboros. No further elaboration is necessary.

“I simply wish to remind you that should you undertake any critical or perilous endeavors in the future, do write to me beforehand and apprise me of the situation.

“Why do I suggest you write before exploiting that lengthy-named fellow? Because you might be clandestinely influenced and neglect the corresponding dangers, forgetting to notify me. As for Termiboros, He will not let you forget my warning, for it would mean you engaging in numerous hazardous exploits and facing a high risk of losing your life. That is clearly not what He desires or strives for.

“If you were to perish, the seal would be affected, but my lord would be alerted. In that event, I shall gather a team to reinforce the seal and eliminate Him.

“With such a skilled angel of fate sealed within you, your future is destined to be quite ‘exciting.’ Praise the lord. You are akin to bait for the followers of evil gods, Hunters, and Demonesses. You shall embark on a multitude of experiences. If you find the time and inclination, do consider writing a lengthy letter to share with me.

“And now, with the assistance of the two Psychiatrists, you can express your desire to alter your faith to Mr. K during a forthcoming gathering. Remember, before you set off to attend the event, offer prayers to my lord for the angel’s protection.”

Lumian read the note patiently, finding Madam Magician’s words both abundant and yet empty.

The most valuable part was her guidance on evading Termiboros’s influence and the reminder to seek her opinion before utilizing the angel’s power. Additionally, she provided a beautifully drawn blueprint that offered a chance to address the corruption within his body at the angelic level.

Lumian burned the note by rubbing his spirituality. He then reached into his pockets, touching the hidden banknotes and coins, before leaving Room 207 and making his way to Room 305.

Anthony Reid had already returned to his lodgings and sat by the bedside, dressed as a clerk.

Lumian produced 400 verl d'or worth of banknotes and handed them over to Anthony Reid.

At the same time, he nodded slightly and stated, "The commission is over."

"It seems you've already encountered the target," Anthony Reid chuckled.

Taking a moment to consider, he inquired, "Can I report the target's information to the authorities?"

"Wait for a week," Lumian replied. He had initially planned to offer Anthony Reid more money to delay claiming the reward from the wanted poster. However, since he sought his opinion, Lumian took advantage of the situation by setting a time limit.

He worried that any investigation or arrest related to Louis Lund might alert Madame Pualis, potentially jeopardizing their meeting.

Anthony Reid did not object and let out a sigh. "You're more suited for the market district than I initially thought."

He had never witnessed a wanted criminal rise to become a leader of a sizable mob so swiftly without being detected by the authorities.

"Competent individuals can thrive anywhere, just like you," Lumian advised Anthony Reid, casting a casual glance around Room 305.

His eyes fell upon a few folded papers on the wooden table near the window. They appeared thicker and smoother, larger than ordinary oil paintings.

What could they be? Lumian focused his gaze for a moment, realizing that the folded papers had a faint bluish hue and a printed texture.

Instantly, the pieces fell into place.

The posters on the wall!

Posters of parliamentary candidates had been plastered all over the place recently!

"You seem particularly invested in the National Convention election," Lumian didn't hold back his speculation as he taunted Anthony Reid. "Do you have a legitimate occupation?"

One of the fundamental eligibility criteria for the elections.

Anthony Reid calmly smiled and replied, "No."

He did not elaborate on his reasons for collecting the parliamentary candidates' posters.

Another commission? Lumian decided not to delve further. He waved his hand dismissively and left Room 305.

Amidst the lunatic's piercing cries, Lumian descended the stairs, left Auberge du Coq Doré, returned to Salle de Bal Brise, and settled at the bar counter.

"Good evening, Boss," the bartender greeted with deference, straightening his posture.

Lumian nodded.

"Give me a glass of absinthe."

Having thought about Cordu too often that day, he needed a dose of psychedelic bitterness to jolt his senses awake.

On the stage, Jenna performed with exaggerated flair, belting out flashy songs. Leaning against the bar counter, Lumian let his gaze wander as he absorbed every note.

Now and then, he would take a sip of the dreamy green liquid, allowing its bitterness to awaken his nerves.

Once he regained composure, he organized the recent matters he had to attend to.

First, there was Mr. K's mission; second, the looming threat from the Poison Spur Mob; third, Susanna Mattise's second assault; and fourth, his upcoming meeting with Madame Pualis.

Regarding the election, Lumian didn't pay it much mind after confirming from Franca that the Savoie Mob also backed Hugues Artois. This meant that even if the opposing party won, it wouldn't entirely suppress the Savoie Mob or impede his mission.

Susanna Mattise's resurgence had been a cause for concern, but thanks to the psychiatric treatment, Lumian wouldn't hesitate to seek assistance from Franca. Resolving this matter had become relatively manageable.

Once official Beyonders committed to the task, they wouldn't be inferior to Lumian, a Sequence 8, in effectiveness. They would undoubtedly uncover Monsieur Ive's issues and the troubles at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, purging Susanna Mattise's evil spirit completely.

This would be accomplished within the next few days. Lumian simply needed to remain vigilant.

Mr. K's mission was rather complex, relying on Gardner Martin. Lumian, not being a Spectator Beyonder, could only attempt to gain the target's approval through repeated efforts. There were no shortcuts for the time being, so rushing was unnecessary.

Similarly, he had to await Madame Pualis's response. Lumian couldn't rush the matter even if he desired to.

Upon analyzing the situation, Lumian concluded that he needed to prioritize dealing with the Poison Spur Mob's threat.

After the election, "Black Scorpion" Roger would receive an additional boon from Madame Moon, ascending to the rank of a Sower. "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina might even advance to the level of Heretic Spellmasters. At that point, Lumian, their primary target, would be defenseless against them. Even with the support of Franca, Baron Brignais, and his allies, the situation would be perilous.

Should I join forces with Franca before the election concludes and infiltrate 126 Avenue du Marché under the cover of darkness to eliminate the remaining leaders of the Poison Spur Mob? Even if Madame Moon sends reinforcements later, by the time they stabilize the situation, I would have earned the Boss's trust and gained a chance to partially withdraw from the market district…

The problem lies in facing a Heretic Spellmaster on their home turf. Even with Franca and me united, defeating him would be a daunting task, not to mention his potential allies…

Perhaps an opportunity will arise to strike at "Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina when they are outside? Lumian pondered as he spotted Charlie, attired as a waiter, approaching the bar counter with a tray.

Nodding in greeting, Lumian instinctively honed in on Charlie's luck.

In an instant, his grasp on the absinthe glass tightened, and his pupils dilated.

He "saw" Charlie's luck stained with blood, a swirling blend of crimson and ebony that sent a shiver down his spine.

This could only mean that Charlie was on the brink of a life-threatening catastrophe within the next two to three days, or perhaps even within the next 24 hours!

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Chapter 208 - 208 Countermeasure

208 Countermeasure

Could Susanna Mattise's attack be imminent? Lumian pondered this question, considering that Charlie had no known enemies and had recently worked as a waiter at Salle de Bal Brise.

Though it was possible that Charlie had simply experienced a string of unfortunate accidents, Lumian wasn't willing to take any chances.

As Charlie carefully placed the tray down and waited, he grew uneasy under Lumian's gaze.

Recalling the other's mystical prophetic ability, Charlie leaned in and whispered, "Did you see something?"

A smile spread across Lumian's face.

"I foresee a romantic encounter in your future. You'll form a relationship that goes beyond friendship with a beautiful woman."

"Is that true?" Charlie asked, surprised and delighted.

The woman's name is Susanna Mattise… Lumian chuckled, suppressing his words. "You're quite gullible, aren't you? How can you believe that?"

"I knew it…" Charlie looked disappointed.

The presence of the Idiot Instrument had already revealed to him Ciel's knack for deception.

Lumian's smile faded as he watched Charlie make his way to the edge of the dance floor, carrying a tray filled with glasses.

Thoughts raced through Lumian's mind.

Am I simply unlucky, or is my fate predetermined? The official Beyonders will soon keep a close watch on Monsieur Ive and the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. They'll arrest all the cultists who believe in the Mother Tree of Desire and locate the evil spirit, Susanna Mattise, to purge her completely. Yet, here I am, facing the possibility of Susanna Mattise launching an attack on me and Charlie today…

Dammit, Termiboros, that pig's son. He must be behind this!

Based on my observations of luck, the problem will likely arise late tonight or perhaps even at midnight the day after tomorrow…

I can't solely rely on Susanna Mattise coming to Charlie and me the day after tomorrow. I must prepare for the worst-case scenario…

Gradually regaining composure, Lumian, influenced by Franca and Jenna's vulgarities, forced himself to remain calm and assess the situation.

Simultaneously, he devised an initial plan of action.

First, he would discreetly alert Charlie, assuming a hidden identity, and instruct him to seek refuge in the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral for the next three days.

Second, Lumian would go to Rue des Blouses Blanches and enlist Franca's aid.

With Franca and Mr. K's finger acting as his protectors, Lumian believed he stood a strong chance of surviving Susanna Mattise's initial onslaught. Furthermore, she would not have another opportunity in the future. Whether it was Franca's message to the official Beyonders through her secret channels or Charlie's presence at the cathedral seeking sanctuary, it would be enough to inform the Eternal Blazing Sun Church of Susanna Mattise's reappearance!

Although Lumian could likely handle Susanna Mattise on his own with Mr. K's assistance, since he already owed Franca a favor, why not accrue a little more debt to ensure greater security?

Without hesitation, Lumian finished his absinthe and departed from Salle de Bal Brise.

Once again, the world spun, and he descended to the ground. He found himself surrounded by a vast network of brownish-green roots, insects scurrying about, and rats hiding in various corners…

Just as Lumian was about to remove his glasses and begin applying his disguise, his eyes caught sight of a clump of turquoise hair entwined with vines and branches.

Bang!

Lumian's head spun, as if he had been hit, and golden stars danced before his eyes.

In haste, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses, bent down, and retched for a few moments.

Once the wave of nausea subsided, Lumian seized the opportunity while the urge to draw still lingered. He reached for his makeup tools and began applying various substances to his face.

Gazing into the dimly lit windowpane, Lumian found himself increasingly unrecognizable. He resembled one of the unkempt drunkards commonly found in dance halls.

When he finished, he averted his gaze, afraid of the disorienting effects that might follow.

Phew… Lumian put away his makeup tools, exhaled deeply, and filtered through the images he had witnessed while wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses.

One image stood out in particular—an image of turquoise hair entwined with branches and vines. It struck a chord of familiarity within him, and he quickly made a connection.

Susanna Mattise also possessed long, turquoise hair interwoven with branches and vines that seemed to materialize from nowhere!

Susanna Mattise's territory likely lies somewhere underground in the market district? Lumian made a preliminary judgment.

He couldn't help but grumble, Why does it have to be underground once again? Isn't the underground of Trier already bustling enough?

However, this also explained why the official Beyonders had been unable to fully cleanse Susanna Mattise during their previous encounter. Underground monsters were always challenging to eliminate, just like the Montsouris ghost.

Lumian recollected the real Monsieur Ive's clandestine visit to Underground Trier late at night. He remembered the perverted Hedsey, who had drugged Jenna and led her to an underground cavern. Hedsey seemed familiar with the area and felt at ease there.

This convinced Lumian that Susanna Mattise was indeed hiding somewhere in Underground Trier, not far from the location chosen by Hedsey.

Deeper into the depths of the underground path, all the way to the end perhaps? Lumian speculated as he changed into simple cargo pants, incongruous with his formal top, and left Room 207.

Inside Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian surveyed the surroundings until he spotted Charlie, serving drinks to guests near the periphery of the dance floor.

Leaning closer, Lumian discreetly brushed past Charlie and whispered, "Susanna Mattise."

Amidst Jenna's singing, booming music, and clamorous voices, the name resonated clearly. Charlie froze in place, as if struck by lightning.

Only then did Lumian gently remind him in a hushed tone, "I have received information that Susanna Mattise will reemerge within the next three days. If you

wish to avoid a grim fate, seek refuge in the cathedral tonight and remain there for three days."

Charlie's initial reaction was one of horror. His second was to search for Ciel. And his third was to inquire anxiously whether he would be fired for taking three days off.

A lump formed in Charlie's throat as he searched in vain for Ciel. He mustered the courage to ask in a hushed voice, "Really?"

You can choose not to believe it… Lumian managed to restrain his instinctual reaction to prevent Charlie from making any connection.

With a deliberate effort to keep his voice low, he continued, "If you go to the cathedral tonight, someone will confirm the truth for you."

Charlie's fear became too overwhelming to contain. He scrutinized the unfamiliar face before him and asked with a tremor in his voice, "Who are you?"

And why did you come specifically to warn me?

"Just someone who wishes you well," Lumian responded, borrowing a phrase his sister often used in jest.

Without further explanation, he walked past Charlie, squeezing his way onto the dance floor and swiftly disappearing from view.

Charlie felt as though he had been plunged into winter, his body shivering uncontrollably.

During moments like this, memories of Susanna Mattise's beauty, tenderness, and passion would occasionally flash through his dreams. But every time, those memories would be overshadowed by grotesque images of tree-like warts, blooming flowers, and slimy substances, extinguishing any desire within him. And now, that monster was making a comeback!

I should make my way to église Saint-Robert! Charlie took a few steps toward the exit with the tray in hand, then halted.

He recalled that it was already late at night, and Avenue du Marché would undoubtedly have very few pedestrians at this hour.

Such an environment posed greater danger than the bustling Salle de Bal Brise!

Susanna Mattise always invades my dreams, or it's in the dead of night when everyone is fast asleep. But here, in the dance hall, with so many eyes upon us, she surely won't dare to appear… Once Ciel returns, I'll ask him to escort me to église Saint-Robert… Charlie withdrew his gaze from the door and decided to wait a little longer.

The dance hall, teeming with various sounds and aromas, offered him a sense of security.

…

3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Having wiped off his makeup, Lumian rapped on Franca's door.

Franca's ponytail had come undone, allowing her flaxen hair to cascade naturally. However, instead of a nightgown, she sported a cotton two-piece pajama set.

Donning summer slippers, she turned to admit Lumian into the room and asked in bewilderment, "Are you here for some mystical knowledge tonight?"

Considering the short time they had been apart—less than two hours—she couldn't think of any other reason.

After Franca closed the door, Lumian spoke with gravity,"Something's happening with Charlie. I suspect Susanna Mattise will make a reappearance within the next two days, possibly even tonight."

"So soon?" Franca couldn't hide her surprise.

She still hadn't relayed the issues with Susanna Mattise, Monsieur Ive, and Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons to 007!

Lumian nodded.

"Although it's hard to accept, all signs point to my guess being correct."

"What's your plan?" Franca wasted no time discussing the possibilities.

Lumian shared his two courses of action with Franca but refrained from mentioning Mr. K's finger.

Franca regarded him with a smile.

"You're remarkably composed.

"Didn't you tell me before that Susanna Mattise is suspected to be a Sequence 5 malevolent spirit? Even if we join forces, we might not be able to defeat her.

"Tsk, are you placing too much confidence in me, or perhaps too much confidence in yourself?"

Lumian smiled. "Both."

"To have survived the calamity in Cordu, you're undoubtedly extraordinary." Franca sighed and glanced at the wall clock in the house. "If we can make it

through the night, there shouldn't be any issues. I'll inform the authorities swiftly through my connections. Wait for me in the living room."

She retreated into her master bedroom and busied herself with something.

Lumian settled on the sofa and directed his gaze at the cuckoo wall clock beside him, silently ticking away the minutes.

Nearly half an hour elapsed before Franca emerged from her room. She had changed into a black robe adorned with leather armor and a hood.

"It's settled. They'll likely launch the operation tomorrow," she informed Lumian, then inquired, "Aren't you concerned that Charlie might encounter trouble on his way to église Saint-Robert? Even ordinary people can stumble upon malevolent spirits along the roadside in the dead of night."

église Saint-Robert served as the primary cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, near the Suhit steam locomotive station. The attached cemetery had once occupied the space now occupied by Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian had already considered this.

"I plan to discreetly follow him to the cathedral after Salle de Bal Brise closes."

"I'll accompany you." Franca furrowed her brow and scrutinized Lumian. "Won't Charlie be at risk in the dance hall? Some evil spirits pay no heed to the presence of others or their numbers."

Given that Susanna Mattise's previous appearances hadn't affected anyone else, Lumian subconsciously believed that she would avoid crowded places. The dance hall was far more crowded than the motel.

Jolted by Franca's reminder, he exclaimed in a deep voice, "Let's hurry back to the dance hall!"

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Chapter 209 - 209 Bad Luck

209 Bad Luck

Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian scanned the dim-lit dance hall, searching for Charlie, but to no avail. His heart sank. Hastily, he motioned for Louis and Sarkota to come closer.

“What’s the matter, Boss?” Louis asked, his voice filled with anxiety.

He assumed that Lumian was dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in the dance hall.

Lumian’s eyes wandered across the waiters, all dressed in vests and bow ties. He casually inquired, “Where’s Charlie? I need to discuss something with him.”

Louis’s eyes widened in shock. “Boss, didn’t Charlie follow you out just now?”

Charlie followed me? Lumian’s pupils contracted, as if he had been struck by a sudden burst of light.

He asked in a deep voice, “When?”

Louis pondered for a moment, confusion evident on his face as he looked at Lumian.

“Less than five minutes ago.”

Lumian’s gaze shifted to Sarkota, his taciturn and reliable subordinate, who also appeared puzzled.

Five minutes ago? I’ve been at Rue des Blouses Blanches for over half an hour. Moreover, the last time I left the dance hall, I was disguised as a drunkard. There’s no way Charlie could have left with me… Lumian swiftly dismissed the possibility of Charlie leaving the dance hall with him unnoticed.

The situation was growing increasingly bizarre!

Considering Charlie’s black ill-fated luck, tinged with crimson red, the probability of him encountering danger was almost 100%!

Suppressing the myriad of thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian said to Louis and Sarkota, “Perhaps someone is impersonating me, but I’m unsure why they would be searching for Charlie.”

“Impossible…” Louis blurted out.

A few minutes ago, he and Sarkota had greeted the boss. It couldn’t have been a fake!

Before Louis could finish his thought, Lumian shot him a cold glare. Immediately, Louis changed his tune and stammered, “Maybe, maybe it’s a fake.”

Lumian didn’t dwell on the question and inquired, “Did Charlie change his clothes when he left the ballroom?”

According to the rules of Salle de Bal Brise, every waiter, bartender, chef, and kitchen helper had two sets of uniforms. However, they were not allowed to take them outside of the dance hall; they could only be kept in the changing room on the first floor.

This was due to the cultural environment in the market district. Bartenders and waiters were prone to bankruptcy caused by gambling, alcoholism, illness, and other issues. If they were allowed to take their uniforms home, they would surely pawn them for cash before disappearing. They wouldn’t care if Salle de Bal Brise was owned by the mob.

Similarly, in Trier’s inexpensive cafés frequented by scavengers, laborers, tramps, and low-level workers, tin utensils and iron chains were used to secure them to the tables. This ensured only a limited range of movement for the customers, preventing them from secretly taking the utensils and selling them.

The more upscale cafés had their own set of troubles. In order to maintain an air of sophistication, they preferred using silver or porcelain utensils. Consequently, the boss had to painstakingly count the utensils after closing each day to check for any missing ones. The waiters were repeatedly instructed to be vigilant about such matters.

He had intended to prevent Charlie from leaving the dance hall in a waiter’s attire, but since Charlie had already departed with the boss, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Most of the dance hall’s rules applied to waiters, dancers, bartenders, chefs, bouncers, cleaners, and even managers. The boss was exempt from such restrictions!

Lumian nodded slightly and calmly said, “You guys carry on with your tasks.”

With that, he made his way toward the changing room near the kitchen.

He suspected that Charlie’s disappearance had something to do with Susanna Mattise!

The small changing room was empty. Lumian glanced around and spotted the locker labeled with Charlie’s name.

Franca, donned in a black robe and hood, materialized beside Lumian and praised, “You acted swiftly. You knew to seek out a divination medium for me.”

“I’m not a fool,” Lumian simply replied. He retrieved a piece of wire he always carried and manipulated it a few times before opening Charlie’s locker where his clothes were kept.

Franca pondered for a couple of seconds before reaching for Charlie’s linen shirt.

She then used a broom that was leaning against the wall outside the changing room to conduct the divination.

“Charlie’s current whereabouts…

“Charlie’s current whereabouts…

“…”

Franca held Charlie’s clothes in her left hand and pressed her right hand against the top of the broom, murmuring to herself.

Eventually, she released her right hand, but the broom remained motionless. It stood as still as if someone were still holding it.

After a few seconds, it crashed to the ground with a thud.

“Was it interfered with?” Lumian probed.

Franca slowly shook her head.

“Doesn’t appear so…”

She swiftly walked over to the full-length mirror in the changing room and stroked its surface a few times.

Holding Charlie’s clothes, she commenced another round of divination.

After a few seconds, the mirror darkened, as if reflecting the darkness itself.

In the next moment, two figures materialized, moving in a hazy yellowish light.

One of them vaguely resembled Charlie, dressed as a waiter, while the other bore a resemblance to Lumian from behind.

Apart from that, they couldn’t discern any further details.

Franca scrutinized the vision for a few seconds before confidently deducing, “They’re underground! That’s why the previous divination couldn’t provide a clear answer. A broom can’t jump and stand on its head, can it?”

Lumian nodded and exited the changing room. He proceeded upstairs to retrieve a carbide lamp and any other useful items he might need later. Then, he swiftly left the dance hall.

He already had a rough idea!

Witnessing the scene, Franca retrieved a glimmering powder from her pocket and combined it with an incantation to conceal herself from view.

On Avenue du Marché, bathed in the eerie glow of the crimson moonlight and gas street lamps, Lumian hastened his pace, scouring the area for any trace or clue.

His destination was the entrance to the underground located in the middle of Avenue du Marché.

Suddenly, amidst the encompassing darkness, Lumian abruptly halted.

He observed that the grills in the drainage ditch had been displaced, and there were disheveled footprints along the roadside. Near the height of an average person's head, there were signs of impact.

Franca revealed herself once more and reconstructed the sequence of events. "It seems like he slipped and stumbled while trying to maintain his balance along the gutter. Eventually, he collided with a street lamp… There should have been blood, but it was cleaned up…"

Perplexed, she muttered to herself,

"It bears a resemblance to the unlucky incident I witnessed earlier today…"

At that moment, Franca experienced a sudden realization. "Could that unlucky imposter, Ive, be the one who took Charlie?"

Lumian had long harbored suspicions, but now he was even more convinced.

"If he can masquerade as Monsieur Ive, it follows that he can also assume my identity.

"This ability is quite remarkable…"

At that instant, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place within Lumian's mind.

Susanna Mattise was on the verge of recovering, yet she remained concerned about the official Beyonders' continued surveillance of Charlie. Thus, she enlisted the fake Monsieur Ive to pose as Ciel and discreetly escort Charlie underground, making it appear like an ordinary occurrence. Once they reached Underground Trier, it would prove challenging for the official Beyonders to locate them.

If they lingered any longer, even divination might be thwarted!

“Evading the official Beyonders during their initial investigation would require impressive skills,” Franca responded. Foregoing her invisibility, she trailed Lumian to the entrance of underground Trier in the middle of Avenue du Marché.

As the yellowish-blue light from the carbide lamp illuminated the staircase below, Lumian noticed two sets of footprints.

One set was familiar—it belonged to Charlie.

Examining the footprints, it was evident that Charlie was apprehensive about descending into the underground in the dead of night. He treaded cautiously, yet ultimately chose to place his trust in Ciel.

For the time being, there were no signs of him being restrained.

“Idiot…” Lumian cursed under his breath.

It was understandable that he couldn’t discern the deception. After all, one was a Beyonder, while the other was an ordinary individual. Nevertheless, they had walked together for quite a distance. Didn’t he sense anything awry during their conversation?

Is it truly so effortless to impersonate me, Lumian Lee?

“Thankfully, we have these footprints,” Franca sighed with relief.

The simplified dowsing rod divination proved challenging to utilize underground. While it might point in the right direction, there might not be a viable path to follow. It often necessitated lengthy detours, increasing the risk of losing their way in the labyrinthine darkness.

The Witch had not brought any tools to illuminate their path. It was unclear whether she was confident in her ability to remain with Lumian or if she simply disregarded the hindrance of darkness on her vision.

Lumian held the carbide lamp and ascended the stairs, reaching the level where the street and square names were indicated.

He moved swiftly, sometimes choosing a direction before Franca could discern the footprints. Soon enough, they discovered Charlie and the imposter Ive’s footprints once again.

Franca felt perplexed. After a brief pause, she couldn’t help but inquire, “It seems you know where the imposter Ive is headed?”

“After that pervert knocked Jenna unconscious, he followed the same path,” Lumian calmly replied.

This was the route familiar to those individuals, a route that evoked a sense of security. Moreover, it was likely that the imposter Ive was leading Charlie to

Susanna Mattise. Susanna might very well be waiting at the end of this path!

Franca refrained from further comment. She utilized the shroud of darkness to partially conceal herself. At times, she scouted ahead, while at others, she watched Lumian's back and flanks.

After several minutes of walking, Lumian and Franca came to a halt.

The area displayed signs of partial collapse. Debris littered the vicinity, and the trails meandered in disarray. Eventually, they led to a small cavity obstructed by rubble.

"The target encountered a minor cave-in and became trapped?" Franca whispered with a hiss. "Is this not excessively unlucky?"

Her gaze then shifted to Lumian.

"Where did you acquire that unlucky charm? Its efficacy seems way too potent."

"I'll procure one for you the next time I come across such misfortune," Lumian responded, uncertain if he would encounter another individual as luckless as the tramp.

As soon as he finished speaking, gravel cascaded from the heap of stones barricading the cave entrance, clattering upon the ground.

In a short while, a passageway was cleared, and a figure emerged cautiously.

With golden-black hair and brilliant light-blue eyes, he possessed a striking handsomeness—yet another Lumian.

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Chapter 210 - 210 Performance

210 Performance

Upon glimpsing the two figures lurking in the shadows, the impostor Ive was taken aback. He raised his right hand and pointed accusingly at Lumian, his voice filled with inquiry.

“Who are you? Why are you pretending to be me?”

As he berated, he hastened his pace, pulling himself out of the tunnel and leaping onto level ground.

In the past, Lumian would have charged forward, ready for close combat or drawing his revolver to unleash a barrage of bullets at his foe. He would have granted no opportunity for words. But this time, for some inexplicable reason, he yearned to put on a show. He desired to witness the other party’s abilities before seizing the perfect moment to display his own.

Without an adversary, there would be no performance!

Franca shared the same sentiment. She eagerly longed to stand in for Lumian, refraining from an immediate attack.

Behind the impostor Ive stood Charlie, disguised as a waiter. As he crawled through the debris, he caught sight of a figure beneath the dual glow of a carbide lamp and a lantern.

He froze in shock at the confrontation between the two Ciels. For a moment, it felt as though he was trapped in a dream. He couldn’t discern who was genuine and who was counterfeit, who aimed to harm him, and who sought to aid him.

The only certainty he held was that danger loomed over him once more!

The impostor Ive assessed Lumian and turned to Franca, his voice laced with anxiety and anger.

“Wake up! You’ve been deceived by this impostor! When have I ever worn such attire?”

After Lumian warned Charlie, he wiped away his makeup but made no change to his clothing. He still sported an unusual combination of a simple formal top and cargo pants. In comparison, the impostor Ive’s white shirt, black vest, brown pants, and laceless leather boots seemed more in line with his usual style.

Franca couldn’t resist putting on a performance.

“Is that so? Then enlighten me, what is my code name?”

The impostor Ive asked in exasperation and amusement, “Madame Red Boots, have you forgotten your moniker?”

Franca couldn’t help but chuckle.

She took a couple of steps backward, blending into the shadows at the periphery of the carbide lamp’s illumination.

The underground, where darkness held sway, was an ideal setting for Demoness combat!

As the fake Ive beheld the scene, a sense of unease swelled within his heart. He knew all too well that his attempt to masquerade as the genuine article had likely been exposed, leaving him unable to maintain his charade. Instantly, he altered his approach.

Discarding the lantern, he lifted his gaze to meet Lumian’s, his countenance growing frigidly cold.

The corners of his mouth curled into a chilling smirk.

“I can’t decide whether to pity or congratulate you for seeing through my guise, but this definitely isn’t advantageous for you.”

With lantern in hand, the fake Ive’s aura surged, transforming into a fearsome volcano teetering on the brink of eruption.

Quivering, he lowered his head, unable to meet the other’s gaze directly. However, his longing to perform and his unwavering resolve compelled him to raise his head, struggling to fix his gaze upon the fake Ive’s face.

Simultaneously, the darkness beyond the light seemed cloaked in an eerie green glow. Vines and branches sprouted from the abyss, entwining the ceiling and rocky walls.

Franca, concealed within the shadows, succumbed to intimidation in the face of the fake Ive’s aura, rendering her unable to maintain her abilities. Her form materialized less than two meters away from the impostor.

Meanwhile, Charlie, still sprawled within the passageway, trembled even more violently. He buried his face in the gravel and earth, his mind blank.

With a disdainful glance toward Lumian and Franca, the fake Ive spoke. “You dare to pursue me, utterly ignorant? The only fortunate aspect is your considerable attractiveness. I find it hard to dispose of you outright.”

His words entered Lumian and Franca's ears, instilling them with fear, compelling them to turn and flee.

This sensation prompted Lumian to realize something profound.

A demigod!

The fake Ive was a demigod, possessing godhood!

Gritting his teeth and summoning his courage, Lumian delved into his pocket, hopeful that Mr. K's finger could serve as a temporary deterrent, buying him and Franca an opportunity to escape the Underground Trier.

So what if you're a demigod? I've encountered demigods before. Fear won't break my spirit or halt my resistance!

Just as Lumian's right palm was poised to make contact with Mr. K's finger, and Franca was on the verge of fleeing, unable to contain herself, a cracking noise resounded from above.

A rock the size of a fist descended, mirroring the former descent of its brethren, hurtling toward the fake Ive, who had been arrogantly observing Lumian and Franca's reactions.

Caught off guard, the impostor Ive managed only to lower his head, barely evading the projectile. The gravel struck his left shoulder, fracturing bone and causing the flesh to sink inward.

He emitted a brief cry, nearly toppling to the ground.

This unexpected turn of events dispersed the menacing aura and godlike presence, leaving behind a scant few turquoise vines and brownish-green branches as testament to the recent occurrence.

Snapping out of his shock, Lumian, driven by his desire to perform and seizing the opportunity to provoke,

discarded the carbide lamp, clutched his stomach, and erupted in laughter.

"A fake? Is everything about you nothing but fake? Don't tell me that thing of yours is a mere piece of wood?"

The fake Ive, who had just recovered from the pain, was overcome with emotion. His gaze fixated upon Lumian, his eyes tinged with an otherworldly green hue.

Unbeknownst to him, Franca had already sprinkled herself with fluorescent powder, vanishing into thin air with a hushed whisper.

In the blink of an eye, Lumian found himself consumed by an intense yearning for the pleasures of the opposite sex.

If Franca hadn't rendered herself invisible, he would have been utterly powerless against the impulse. However, he wasn't entirely bereft of reason. It was just that his actions had become burdensome, both physically and mentally.

Struggling, Lumian extracted the revolver from its holster, endeavoring to take aim at the fake Ive.

In his current state, he inexplicably found the other's visage profoundly alluring.

Bang!

Lumian squeezed the trigger, but his shot missed the impostor Ive.

Fury ignited within the fake Ive's eyes. With agile grace, he closed in on his target, his hand rising to deliver a resounding slap across Lumian's face.

Instantly, his appearance underwent a subtle alteration, as if he possessed limited control over his image. He softened Lumian's masculine features, lending them a touch of femininity.

Lumian gasped for breath, his finger squeezing the trigger once more.

A tumultuous surge of desire threatened to consume him. He yearned to embrace the female rendition of the fake Ive and indulge in unspeakable acts.

Amidst the maelstrom of his intense emotions, he instinctively recalled the words of the psychiatrist, Madam Susie, and promptly began taking deep, steadying breaths.

Bang!

Lumian found a measure of tranquility, successfully discharging another shot from the revolver.

The fake Ive hadn't anticipated the unwavering fortitude of his adversary, who managed to retain his sanity. Narrowly evading the bullet that grazed his arm, rending his garments and scorching his flesh, he couldn't suppress a pained grunt. In that moment, Lumian, warily mindful of the opponent's abilities, ceased his pretense, seizing the opportunity to grip the ritual silver dagger and plunge it into his own ribs, refraining from extracting it.

The pain jolted his senses, quelling much of his desire.

Likewise, the fake Ive shook off the lingering effects of Provocation, regaining a measure of clarity.

He understood that the current circumstances were ill-suited for an extended confrontation. Swiftly producing a golden coin, he hurled it toward the crevice obstructed by debris.

Lumian, overcome by an uncontrollable avarice, lunged toward the gleaming coin with the ritual silver dagger, eager to claim it as his own.

Seizing the opportunity, the fake Ive sprinted deeper into the underground, displaying swiftness surpassing that of ordinary mortals.

Suddenly, his feet skidded, and a slick swoosh echoed through the air.

Unbeknownst to him, the path had been encased in a layer of frost!

Struggling to regain his footing, the fake Ive endeavored to restore his balance.

However, in that very moment, a towering figure clad in a black robe and hood materialized behind him.

With a swift motion, Franca extended her right hand, revealing a hidden blade enveloped in black flames. She aimed to plunge it into the fake Ive's back, employing the full force of an Assassin's strike.

With a pfft, despite the fake Ive's best efforts to evade and rely on some kind of performance to toughen his skin and muscles like stone, the blade managed to pierce his body.

His eyes widened, and he twisted his body forcefully, capturing a glimpse of Franca through his ghostly green gaze.

Having successfully executed her attack, Franca intended to take a step back and utilize the shadows to create distance before triggering the detonation of the black flames coursing within the target's body. However, her limbs suddenly grew weak, and she bent over.

She clenched her legs together, a watery light flickering in her eyes resembling a serene lake.

Having anticipated the deep connection between the fake Ive she was tailing and the deviant Hedsey, Franca was prepared for the current circumstances. Without hesitation, she reached into her concealed pocket, aiming to retrieve the smelling salts she had acquired earlier.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Lumian, having secured the golden coin, discharged three shots at the severely wounded fake Ive.

Desperately attempting to evade, the fake Ive's precarious footing on the icy surface undermined his ability to maintain even basic balance. Eventually, he plummeted to the ground with a resounding thud, one of the bullets piercing his abdomen.

With a chance to catch her breath, Franca inhaled the scent of the salts, the invigorating aroma jolting her senses awake. Suppressing her desires, she clenched her left hand.

Black flames erupted from the fake Ive's body, devouring his soul and eliciting a mournful cry.

Lumian aimed once more and pulled the trigger.

The final bullet erupted forth, instantaneously puncturing the fake Ive's forehead.

With a deafening bang, the fake Ive's head split open, spilling forth crimson and white.

Observing Franca bend over once again, Lumian hurriedly made his way to her side, circling around the frost-covered area.

Franca raised her gaze, her eyes moist as she softly gasped for air.

Suddenly, she embraced Lumian, but her nostrils detected the presence of a metal canister with an open lid pressed against her nose.

The indescribably potent scent compelled her to sneeze repeatedly, diminishing much of her desire.

"Dammit, this stuff is far more potent than smelling salts!" Franca blurted out as soon as she regained consciousness.

Lumian quickly took a sniff himself and let out a sneeze.

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Chapter 211 - 211 Spirit Channeling

211 Spirit Channeling

While Lumian sneezed, Franca swiftly took two steps forward and crouched beside the fake Ive's lifeless body.

With a delicate grip, she extinguished the flickering black flames that still clung to it.

"Thank goodness it hasn't burned too far, or the soul would have dissipated," Franca breathed a sigh of relief, straightening up. She reached into her pocket and retrieved a handful of powder that resembled the pitch-blackness of night.

Lumian stowed away the canister of stimulating gas and glanced at Franca, curiosity etched on his face.

"Are you planning to channel his spirit?"

In the recent battle, the fake Ive had displayed the strength of a Mid-Sequence Beyonder and wielded peculiar abilities. Lumian couldn't hold back, or the situation would have taken a perilous turn.

Franca nodded subtly, responding, "Indeed. Channeling a spirit now will yield significant results."

"And which entity do you intend to invoke?" Lumian asked casually.

Franca chuckled before answering, "None. I've merged the principles of Magic Mirror Divination and devised a spirit-summoning spell. While it may not rival the most professional methods, it suffices. Moreover, it won't attract the attention of deities from the corresponding domain."

"You're quite clever," Lumian praised, his words laced with a hint of mockery.

Exasperated yet amused, Franca retorted, "It's called having an academic spirit. We—uh, your sister—have conducted similar research and experiments. Usually, I can't be bothered to overthink things. Not because I lack intelligence, but because the burden of endless calculations is tiresome. The key to life is to remain relaxed and not get entangled in every intricate detail."

Her gaze swept over Charlie, still sprawled amidst the rubble in the tunnel. Franca refrained from mentioning Gandalf, the president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

Is this why you've adapted so well after becoming a woman? Lumian observed Franca building a wall of spirituality in the vicinity as he approached Charlie.

Witnessing Ciel's approach, Charlie snapped out of his daze and crawled out of the debris on all fours.

Lumian gazed at him, his expression devoid of emotion.

What he was thinking was: Charlie has just witnessed the battle between Franca, me, and the imposter Ive. If he seeks refuge at the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, there's a high probability that he won't be able to conceal it when questioned by official Beyonders utilizing their powers. This situation differs from the previous one, where the official Beyonders believed everything was under their control. They were prone to carelessness and had blind spots in their minds…

Charlie's initial elation waned as Lumian continued to scrutinize him in silence. His heart began pounding like a jazz band's drumbeat.

Fear and confusion evident in his voice, Charlie finally mustered the courage to ask, "What's the matter?"

Lumian observed that Charlie's luck remained a blend of red and black, although it had slightly improved since before.

This indicated that Susanna Mattise's threat had not been completely resolved.

He fell silent for a few seconds before speaking up, "Remember to head to église Saint-Robert later."

Having already contacted Madame Pualis, Lumian no longer needed to stay at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman or manage Salle de Bal Brise. As long as he remained with the Savoie Mob, he still had a chance to fulfill Mr. K's mission.

Furthermore, Franca was now involved. With her vouching for him while in the Boss's good graces, Lumian could be assigned other profitable ventures even without Salle de Bal Brise. However, the earnings might not be as substantial.

"Alright, alright!" Charlie heaved a sigh of relief.

Having experienced many things, Charlie possessed an open-minded personality. He belonged to the kind of people who grew more excited as the number of individuals increased. Soon enough, his curiosity got the better of him. Pointing at the lifeless imposter Ive lying on the ground, he asked,

"Who's that? Why does he look exactly like you…"

Before Charlie could finish his question, he paused. As the fake Ive met his demise, the facial muscles relaxed, no longer resembling Ciel. The corpse appeared unfamiliar.

“That’s someone who believed in an evil god and gained strange powers,” Lumian explained simply, tailoring his response to Charlie’s comprehension. “He has a certain connection to Susanna Mattise.”

Charlie felt a lingering fear.

“No wonder he kept leading me underground…”

Unable to hold back, Lumian cursed, “You imbecile! You’ve been with him for so long, and yet you didn’t sense anything was off about him? Does having my face mean he’s me?”

Charlie replied sheepishly, “When I entered Underground Trier, I sensed something was wrong.

“He was very quiet. He only mentioned taking me underground to completely resolve the Susanna Mattise problem. He’s not like you, always cracking jokes and teasing.

“I thought it was because the situation was urgent and you weren’t in the mood…”

Lumian sighed and shifted his gaze to Franca, realizing that Charlie, being an ordinary person, couldn’t see through the Beyonder disguise that could fool even official Beyonders, no matter how astute he was.

The Witch had finished preparing for her own spirit-channeling spell. Standing before the fake Ive’s lifeless body, she held two white candles and chanted a series of incantations in Hermes.

Due to the wall of spirituality, Lumian could only catch fragments of the chant. Franca described herself and the imposter Ive, with the former being the source of spirituality and the foundation for maintaining the ritual, and the latter being the object of prayer—the Magic Mirror that provided answers to questions.

As for Charlie, he heard even less and couldn’t make sense of it all.

A faint light emerged on the makeup mirror in Franca’s hand, and its interior turned into an abyss of deep darkness, as if it had sunk to the river’s depths.

A hazy, pale-white face swiftly appeared in the mirror, bearing a resemblance of 50 to 60% to the deceased fake Ive.

Switching to Intis, Franca inquired, “Who are you and which organization do you belong to?”

The imposter Ive, replied in a dazed manner, “Rentas, a member of the Bliss Society.”

Rentas… Lumian suddenly recalled the name.

The word “Rentas” often appeared on the posters outside Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. He was a prominent male supporting actor.

Franca pressed on with her questioning, “What kind of organization is the Bliss Society? And how is it connected to Susanna Mattise?”

The imposter Ive, Rentas, spoke with an otherworldly voice, “The Bliss Society was originally a secret society for women who love women. Susanna was one of them.

“She grew weary of being involved with members of parliament, high-ranking officials, bankers, newspaper moguls, and other men. She sought solace among fellow ladies and madams who shared her love for women. Eventually, she received divine enlightenment and a boon, becoming a priestess of my lord. She transformed the small Bliss Society into a secret organization that worships my lord.

“In today’s society, it’s inconvenient for women to be openly involved in many affairs. Therefore, the Bliss Society has admitted some male members who can also receive boons, but they lack the privilege to partake in core matters or possess knowledge of the most confidential aspects.”

“Remarkable!” Franca applauded.

She knew that Rentas was referring to the evil god known as the Mother Tree of Desire. Delving into such matters made her apprehensive, fearing that she might stumble upon mystical knowledge she shouldn’t acquire.

A secret society for women who love women… Male members excluded from core matters… Lumian suddenly grasped something.

He stood by the wall of spirituality and gazed at the makeup mirror in Franca’s hand.

“So, Hedsey frequently seeks out street girls and hunts for prey because his desires cannot be fulfilled within the Bliss Society?”

“Yes,” Rentas replied. “Women love women exclusively. When I was a Sex Addict, I had to satisfy my desires on my own. Fortunately, I was more attractive than him and had female audience members who admired me. There were plenty of street girls in the market district, so I didn’t need to take the risk of pursuing excitement.”

“That’s lit!” Franca expressed her feelings with peculiar words. She clicked her tongue and sighed. “Isn’t there a regular secret group for women who love women?”

“Yes,” Rentas firmly responded. “To my knowledge, there’s the Moment Society and the Narcissus Society. They often organize women orgies at Trocadéro’s Red House Café. We have been attempting to establish contact with them and convert

them into believers of my lord[1].”

Trocadéro was situated in Quartier 16 on the north bank of the Srenzo River, in the square district. Known as the Triumph Square established by Emperor Roselle, it was a small town surrounded by a vast suburban forest. It was renowned for its exceptional wine production. Trocadéro Wine stood second only to Aurmir red wine in the world.

Fascinated, Franca listened and repeated the terms, “Trocadéro… Red House Café… Women orgies…”

Lumian couldn’t help but feel more concerned about the term “Sex Addict.” It seemed to perfectly suit the twisted state of Hedsey. It likely corresponded to Sequence 8 of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway. However, he feared that time was running out for the spirit channeling, so he didn’t rush to delve into the matter. Instead, he redirected his focus to Susanna Mattise.

“How did Susanna Mattise transform into an evil spirit? And why did you bring Charlie underground?”

Rentas’s pale-white face contorted in distortion.

“She died while receiving a boon and transformed into an evil spirit.

“She told us that because her name was still on the lips of many Trieriens and her portrait was used by numerous men to satisfy themselves, she didn’t completely dissipate. She retained a certain level of rationality, albeit warped. She became more consumed by her own affairs, neglecting all else.

“She was gravely injured by official Beyonders during her last encounter and spent time recuperating at the altar. We were worried that once she fully recovered, she would seek out Charlie and attract the attention of the authorities. So, we took advantage of the election and brought Charlie to the altar in advance, handing him over to her for handling.”

Charlie had already moved to Lumian’s side. His face turned ashen as he listened, feeling as if he had stepped into the depths of hell.

Franca nodded subtly and spoke, “Where is this altar? How much time until Susanna Mattise fully recovers?”

“The altar…” The surface of the makeup mirror revealed a fading blurry face, unveiling an underground tunnel.

The tunnel stretched endlessly, branching off in multiple directions before leading to a small quarry cave engulfed by vines and branches.

There, a colossal brownish-green tree stump emerged abruptly from the ground. Its form consisted of thick branches, with roots originating from an unknown place.

As the image of the tree stump grew clearer, Franca hastily interrupted the manifestation, fearing any potential disturbances.

Rentas continued, “Susanna will regain her full strength in two days and depart from the altar.”

[1] Such things did exist in the real world during that era. Parisians were experts in this regard. For further details, refer to Histoire insolite des cafés parisiens.

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Chapter 212 - 212 Actor

212 Actor

Franca carefully calculated the time and inquired with meticulous detail, “What perils lie at the altar? How much progress has Susanna Mattise made in her recovery today?”

Upon hearing Franca’s question, Lumian made a rough conjecture about her thoughts.

If it was possible, they could seize the opportunity to destroy the altar and eliminate Susanna Mattise, who was now weakened, once and for all!

Before departing from Salle de Bal Brise to track down the imposter Ive, Lumian had contemplated a similar issue. Since Rentas had taken Charlie underground, he believed their destination was Susanna Mattise’s hiding place. Consequently, when he retrieved the carbide lamp, he also retrieved a few bundles of detonators from the safe, hoping to utilize the unique environment to blast those intruders to their demise.

Rentas’s hazy, pale face took on a hint of sanctity.

!!

“The altar is the altar. Only the light of my lord exists. There is no danger.”

Lumian muttered to himself, standing by the wall of spirituality, By stating it that way, it only heightens the danger.

Rentas continued, “I do not know the exact condition of Susanna. All I know is that two weeks ago, we could not see her, but she would occasionally make sounds. Last week, she could communicate with us normally, and we could perceive her when we activated our Spirit Visions. Today, she remains the same as before, but she appears extremely feeble.”

Based on Rentas’s account, Lumian made a preliminary estimation. Susanna, who was originally a Fallen Tree Spirit equivalent to Sequence 5, is now nearing Sequence 6?

If Susanna had not been hiding at the Mother Tree of Desire’s altar, Lumian would have considered it worth the risk.

Franca pondered for a moment and spoke, “Do you typically offer prayers at the altar and receive boons?”

“Yes,” Rentas replied with a nostalgic tone. “Susanna is our priestess. She enables us to experience the Lord’s love for the world and unveils everyone’s true desires, allowing us to truly understand ourselves.”

Upon hearing this, Franca decided to forego further inquiries and seek the truth in the details.

“Is the altar usually protected?”

“Susanna is always there,” Rentas’s blurred, pale face swayed gently in the mirror.

Franca gazed at the makeup mirror in her hand and queried, “Was the altar under anyone’s protection during the two weeks that Susanna was severely injured?”

Rentas’s spirit responded truthfully, “No.”

Franca couldn’t help but turn her head and glance at Lumian. She realized that he too appeared disappointed and regretful.

From Rentas’s answer, they both discerned a crucial fact: the altar possessed a concealed and formidable protective mechanism!

Otherwise, regardless of its underground concealment and the difficulties in locating it, they would need to consider guarding against bounty hunters or cave adventurers fond of searching for treasure in Underground Trier. Simultaneously, they would have to be cautious of smugglers who might have temporarily altered their routes or wandering university students.

Franca let out a sigh, deciding that it would be best to leave the altar and Susanna Mattise in the hands of the authorities.

Franca shifted her focus and inquired about something else.

“How many members are there in the Bliss Society at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?”

“Not many,” Rentas’s blurry face with flickering dark green eyes responded. “But I only know a few. Ive, Hedsey, and I report to Maipú Meyer. He is the theater manager and represents Susanna in the core affairs of the Bliss Society since she became an evil spirit.”

“Why choose a man? Isn’t it believed that women only love women? It would be easier to communicate with the other core members of the Bliss Society if it were a woman,” Franca objected.

Are you certain there’s no hidden significance in this conversation? Lumian sensed Madame Hidden Blade’s curiosity piqued.

Rentas’s voice drifted as he replied, “Maipú Meyer used to be Susanna’s lover.”

Franca clicked her tongue and sighed.

“So, we have the high priestess going against the principles of the organization, loving both men and women.”

As she spoke, she cast a glance at Charlie, who appeared bewildered and terrified.

Rentas didn’t shy away from revealing the truth about Maipú Meyer.

“Before Susanna joined the Bliss Society, they were lovers. Furthermore, he was the only one who could make Susanna feel at ease and relaxed. After her divine awakening and embracing her faith in my lord, she transformed the Bliss Society and recruited Maipú Meyer. However, their intimate relationship ceased. When she became an evil spirit, she no longer limited her affections to women and resumed her connection with Maipú Meyer. Meanwhile, she sought out other targets, infiltrating their dreams and draining their energy. She would fall in love with them before killing them.”

Charlie’s face grew paler with each passing word, as if he had fallen into an inescapable nightmare that would only end in death.

Franca, who had seriously contemplated having her lover Gardner bear her child, commented, “This is all rather twisted.”

She then smiled and remarked, “Does Maipú Meyer enjoy wearing green hats?”

“No, he now exclusively wears a black top hat. He even meticulously grooms the tips of his beard,” Rentas dismissed Franca’s speculation.

Lumian recalled the mention of a woman’s death in Aunett Town during Mr. K’s Gathering.

If Maipú Meyer receives a boon and becomes a male Fallen Tree Spirit, could he enter women’s dreams and induce erotic fantasies to drain their energy, gradually weakening them until they perish?

The Bliss Society consists of women as its core members, emphasizing that they only love women. It is unlikely for male members to attain such high levels of power. Those incidents are not a result of the Bliss Society, but they too believe in the Mother Tree of Desire? Or could it be due to women loving women?

Franca pressed on with her questioning.

“Why don’t you even know the number of members in the Bliss Society at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? So, other than Susanna, there are no female members among the Bliss Society members you’re familiar with?”

Rentas’s pale, blurry face seemed to contort.

“Only Maipú Meyer interacts with the female members.”

“While I’m uncertain about the current status of female members at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, I can speculate on who they were in the past.”

“How?” Franca inquired curiously.

Rentas replied, “Those who joined our theater started as supporting actresses. Through honing their acting skills, they eventually became the leading ladies before they left. They were the core members of the Bliss Society.

“The theater was established as a safe and dependable venue for them to fulfill their inner desires until they could gain initial control.”

“Why must they act?” Lumian recalled Rentas’s various performances.

Rentas struggled for a moment before explaining, “We were blessed with a boon equivalent to a Sequence 7 called Actor.

“This gift enables us to evoke a deep yearning for attention and a desire to perform in our targets. It also awakens our own hidden desire to showcase ourselves and perform. Before we fully master the power of this boon, we cannot restrain this impulse. Therefore, we require a proper stage to satiate our desires without arousing suspicion.

“Every applause from the audience is a validation for us.”

A peculiar Sequence… Instead of immediately attacking Rentas, I confronted him. I failed to utilize the ritual silver dagger in time to suppress my explosive desires because unknowingly, my own desire to perform was awakened… Lumian came to a realization.

Franca clapped her hands, exclaiming, “That explains it. No wonder I was so immersed in acting today!”

She smiled and inquired, “Does your ability to disguise as Ive and Ciel also come from Actor?”

Rentas’s face nodded slightly.

“We can manipulate our muscles, skin, and bones to a certain extent. We possess all the necessary skills for disguise, including makeup techniques and prop production. Moreover, Actors have the talent for ‘imitation.’ They can convincingly portray anything. If they act as an ordinary person, their Astral Projection will appear ordinary as well. If they portray a soldier, they’ll display remarkable combat and marksmanship.”

“What if they act as a woman?”

“What about acting as a Beyonder?”

Franca and Lumian raised their questions.

Finally, the two of them understood how the fake Ive could deceive official Beyonders and why the theater performers at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons excelled in their craft.

Working with real Actors every day, it was no wonder their acting skills were top-notch.

Rentas's spirit spoke in a dazed manner, "To portray a woman, you need to prepare props in advance, such as fake breasts and long hair.

"When acting as other Beyonders, if I have observed them beforehand, I can replicate their corresponding abilities, but they won't have tangible effects. They are more like illusions. However, if I were given the opportunity to closely observe and learn from a Beyonder over several months, I could perform similar but significantly weakened abilities."

Impressive indeed… Lumian sighed, then asked in a deep voice, "Who were you impersonating when you emanated that powerful aura?"

"None other than Susanna, as she connects with the altar's aura while conducting the boon ritual." Rentas revealed a trace of piety and reverence.

Franca and Lumian exchanged glances, grateful that they had abandoned the idea of heading to the altar to eliminate future troubles.

Based on Rentas's response, it appeared that when Susanna merged with the altar, she could exhibit power at a demigod level!

"Do Actors possess any other abilities?" Franca inquired.

Rentas shook his head. "No. However, Maipú Meyer once cautioned me against becoming too engrossed in my roles while acting."

Lumian seized the opportunity to ask, "What are the names of the other Sequences corresponding to Actor?"

Rentas's voice took on a sinister tone. "Sequence 9 Scrooge, Sequence 8 Sex Addict, Sequence 6 Recipient, and Sequence 5 Baby Cupid. Beyond that, I am unaware."

Quite fitting… Lumian, who was acquainted with the abilities of Scrooge and Sex Addict, questioned further, "What does 'Recipient' entail?"

"It involves craving success and recognition from high society or the public," Rentas explained.

Curiosity piqued, Franca asked, "It seems that you Actors aren't able to fully control your corresponding desires at every Sequence. At Sequence 5, won't your desires explode upon encountering anything?"

“In truth, as they progress through the Sequences, individuals can gradually gain control over their corresponding desires,” Rentas clarified. “For Actors, their primary desire is acting. Their desires for wealth and the opposite sex are only slightly stronger than usual. They won’t appear pathological or completely uncontrollable as a result.”

Lumian found himself perplexed.

“Then why were you so miserly when you portrayed Monsieur Ive?”

He chose to pick up a gold coin of unknown origin.

Rentas responded naturally, “Because the real Ive is like that. I must stay true to the role.”

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Chapter 213 - 213 Correct Interpretation

213 Correct Interpretation

Upon hearing Rentas's response, Lumian found himself torn between laughter and rejoicing, grateful that he had achieved a satisfactory outcome through a mistaken train of thought.

Originally, Lumian believed that Beyonders, like the imposter Ive, who worshiped the Mother Tree of Desire, would struggle to control their insatiable hunger and carnal desires. That's why he decided to use a gold coin to carry the vagrant's bad luck. To his surprise, the followers of the evil god were primarily influenced by their specific desires at different stages. Once they mastered the power or received a new boon, they could break free and progress to the next state. While their desires remained potent, they were no longer uncontrollable.

In simpler terms, if Rentas hadn't been portraying Monsieur Ive and didn't feel the need to exhibit stinginess, there was a high probability that he wouldn't have picked up the ill-fated gold coin and would have approached the situation with greater caution.

Of course, if Rentas hadn't been attuned to changes in fate and failed to detect the issue with the gold coin, he would likely have claimed it for himself once he realized its owner was long gone and wouldn't return. After all, he possessed a touch more greed than the average person, and as the saying goes, "finders keepers" in the hearts of a certain percentage of ordinary individuals.

Lumian now grasped the full meaning behind Rentas's words.

Indeed, one mustn't become lost in the role when acting.

However, Rentas was in the midst of acting, so scrutinizing the details was not a concern for him. Otherwise, it would have been easy for others to discover his true identity as the impostor Ive…

Franca sensed that the spirit channeling was coming to an end and hurriedly asked, "Who are the suspected core members of the Bliss Society?"

Rentas's pale, indistinct face twitched.

"Even if I were to tell you, you wouldn't find them.

“They joined Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons after receiving boons and becoming actresses. They adopted false names and concealed their true faces. Once their acting skills reached maturity and they gained control over their corresponding desires, they would reclaim their real identities upon leaving the theater.

“If you wish to uncover their assumed identities, gather a list of all the female leads in Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons’ plays from the past two years. Look for those who performed most frequently.”

At the mention of the female lead at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Lumian’s mind recalled a name.

“Could Charlotte Calvino be one of the core members of the Bliss Society?”

She played the lead in the play Forest Fairy. The costumes in the promotional stills evoked memories of Susanna Mattise.

Rentas’s face grew increasingly elusive, and his voice became more ethereal.

“I don’t know. She rose through the ranks as an apprentice actress and only recently started taking the lead roles in the past few months. She’s not an outsider, but Maipú Meyer might promote her to a member of the Bliss Society.”

Franca was about to inquire about Maipú Meyer’s corresponding stages and abilities when Rentas’s spirit, consumed by black flames, could no longer hold on and dissipated upon the surface of the makeup mirror.

With a tinge of regret, Franca concluded the ritual and dismissed the wall of spirituality.

As she squatted beside Rentas’s lifeless body, rummaging through his pockets, she let out a sigh and remarked, “I didn’t manage to get to Maipú Meyer. Forget it, I’ll leave it to the authorities to handle it.”

Lumian paused, pondering her question.

“I’ve heard from a playwright that Maipú Meyer is highly ambitious. He aims to make Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons the most renowned theater in Trier and receive the prestigious Intis Legion of Honor medal.”

“Desire for success and recognition?” Franca recalled Rentas’s depiction of a Sequence 6 recipient. “I suppose that’s the limit for male members of the Bliss Society?”

Franca had already collected a stack of items.

Two metal canisters, a leather wallet, a peculiar dough that conformed to facial contours, thin skin-like pieces, eyebrow pencils, and various makeup tools…

“Give it a sniff.” Franca tossed the two metal canisters to Lumian.

Lumian distinguished them for a moment before responding, “One canister contains the scent you just experienced, and the other should hold a matching sedative.”

They appeared to be essential items for followers of the Mother Tree of Desire when venturing outside.

“Mysticism-branded smelling salts?” Franca mused, then added, “You can keep what’s left of the canister you have. This is mine. I’ll give you the sedative. Choose from these disguises and take the money from the wallet. Anything you don’t want, I’ll keep. Bloody hell, this pauper doesn’t even possess materials, talismans, or weapons, let alone Beyonder characteristics or mystical items!”

“The sedative and mysticism smelling salts will prove useful,” Lumian, who had only obtained Beyonder abilities from “Hammer” Ait, didn’t show much concern.

Franca didn’t overlook any part of Rentas’s body—including his crotch and soles—yet she found nothing more.

She withdrew a folded cloth bag and opened it, carefully stashing away the collection from the ground. Then, she addressed Lumian, “We’ll divide this once we return.”

With that, she rose to her feet and glanced at the frightened Charlie. She muttered to herself thoughtfully, “He witnessed our clash with Rentas. What should we do?”

Charlie’s legs trembled, and as he leaned toward Lumian, he gritted his teeth and proclaimed, “I-I won’t betray you!”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, Franca let out a sigh and declared, “Forget it. We’ll leave it to the official Beyonders.”

She deliberately introduced the topic before promptly reaching a conclusion. Lumian, finally freed from the grip of his acting impulses, regained his composure and rationality. After careful consideration, he suggested,

“I have alternative solutions.

“Charlie doesn’t need to seek refuge at église Saint-Robert, nor does he need to worry about Susanna Mattise finding him.”

He thought of his Luck Transference Spell!

Before, he refrained from using it as Susanna Mattise had yet to bother Charlie. There was no corresponding fate to alter. But now, Susanna Mattise was on the path to recovery, and Charlie was her primary target. His luck had taken a turn, and a life-threatening calamity loomed. His luck had indeed changed!

When the moment arrived, Lumian would "gift" the gold coin carrying the weight of the impending disaster to the real Ive, allowing them to face it on their own.

Naturally, this differed from the Substitution Spell and Fallen Mercury's Fate Exchange. It only diverted bloodshed temporarily. In other words, Charlie wouldn't be in Susanna Mattise's crosshairs for the next few days. However, in a few days' time, unless Susanna Mattise was wholly purified or had lost her memories, this external threat would still remain.

Nevertheless, the authorities would take action tomorrow, armed with sufficient intel!

When Lumian realized that Charlie's luck was in jeopardy, he refrained from intervening because he could only change Charlie's luck, not his own. Susanna would undoubtedly target him as well, the adversary who had provoked Charlie's betrayal. Therefore, he opted for the simplest approach—to disguise himself and urge Charlie to seek refuge at the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, thus buying more time to guard against Susanna Mattise. They were now certain that Susanna had two days left to recuperate.

"Really?" Charlie's eyes brightened.

Lumian smiled and inquired, "Do you trust me or not?"

Charlie stammered, "I-I believe you! I believe you!

"You just like to tease people about trivial matters."

Curiosity piqued, Franca asked, "What way?"

A method you shouldn't be aware of… Lumian silently muttered, contemplating the specifics.

If I wish to alter Charlie's current luck, mere prayers won't suffice. I must harness the power sealed within me…

Poor Charlie; I'll have to render him unconscious. I can't expose the corruption within me or the suspicion of seeking aid from an evil god…

Just as Lumian was about to instruct Charlie to accompany him and prepare for his temporary incapacitation, a thought flashed across his mind.

Does utilizing the power within the seal constitute exploiting Termiboros?

Should I write to Madam Magician and seek her opinion?

Previously, the tramp's ill fortune bore no relation to mysticism or Beyonder abilities. The ritual required minimal power. However, the support needed to resist a Sequence 5 evil spirit atop an evil god's altar would likely be several times greater than before…

What would occur then?

Since Charlie's luck changed, everything had become urgent. The timing was impeccable. It seemed as though an opportunity had emerged without allowing me a chance to weigh my options…

If I hadn't just corresponded with Madam Magician and received her reminder, I might have already altered Charlie's luck…

Noticing Lumian's motionless state, Franca inquired, "What's the matter?"

Shaking off his stupor, Lumian contemplated for a moment.

"I just realized that the method I had prepared seems to have significant flaws."

"Ah," Charlie uttered, a mixture of disappointment and concern.

Franca ruminated for a few seconds before suggesting, "I have an idea as well.

"Charlie won't head to église Saint-Robert. He'll follow us to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"As long as we survive the night, we'll be fine by tomorrow.

"Think about it. Our original plan was to confront Susanna Mattise, and she still has two days remaining at the altar. Even if we face an attack tonight, it will likely come from Maipú Meyer and his lackeys. Even if he recruits other core members of the Bliss Society, as long as they are inferior to Susanna Mattise at the altar, we stand a good chance of holding out until dawn. If things don't go as planned, we can create a commotion and attract the attention of official Beyonders. We can escape from the market district amidst the chaos.

"This is the worst-case scenario. However, if Charlie goes to église Saint-Robert, we must consider moving immediately. We could also become targets."

Lumian pondered for a few moments and found the idea quite feasible.

He nodded and stated, "I have no objections."

His gaze then fell upon Charlie, who eagerly replied, "I don't have any issues either."

Charlie held considerable confidence in Ciel and Franca.

Lumian refocused his attention and observed Charlie's luck.

To his surprise, Charlie's impending disaster had noticeably weakened and showed signs of improvement!

What… Charlie's true misfortune lies in participating in the luck transference ritual? Did his fate change when I abandoned that notion? Although a bloody calamity still awaits, it appears less severe… Bloody Termiboros! Lumian comprehended the situation in an instant and couldn't help but inwardly curse.

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Chapter 214 - 214 Encounter

214 Encounter

After cursing Termiboros, Lumian caught sight of Franca securing the cloth bag with war spoils and fastening it to her person.

A thought struck him, triggering a recollection of one of Scrooge's abilities, and he reminded her, "Aren't you worried those Scrooges will track us down using lost possessions?"

He had previously informed Franca about the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, mentioning that the sinister cult possessed a peculiar knack for detecting the whereabouts of their lost belongings.

In contrast to the perverted Hedsey, Rentas carried out his orders dutifully. If anything happened to him, he might possess something from Maipú Meyer to determine his location and the saboteur's whereabouts.

Franca scoffed dismissively. "That ability surely has its limitations in terms of time and range. By the time the folks at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons realize Rentas is missing, it will prove exceedingly arduous for them to track us down.

"Besides, with Charlie here, they could find us if they truly desired. Whether we take these items or not, Charlie is akin to Susanna Mattise's lost possession—no, her lost lover."

Charlie stood dazed, bewildered by the conversation between Ciel and "Red Boots." It wasn't until Franca mentioned his name that he grasped his "situation" somewhat. Sporting a bitter expression, he retorted, "We're not lovers…"

Franca consoled Charlie, though her sincerity remained questionable. "Can't be helped. She's convinced of it on her own accord, and she's strong enough."

Persuaded by Franca's argument, Lumian ceased dwelling on Scrooge's abilities. He pulled out the ritual silver dagger and promptly tended to his wound.

Bending down, he scooped up Rentas's lifeless body and carried it to the debris-blocked hole, shoving it into the passage the Actor had previously dug.

Charlie watched in horror, marveling at Ciel's skills as a ruthless mob leader who had struck fear into the Poison Spur Mob. His attention then shifted to Rentas's attire—shirt, vest, pants, and boots.

They seem relatively new. If they are stripped and pawned, I reckon they can fetch at least two verl d'or… Charlie's mouth gapped, but he refrained from voicing his thoughts.

Franca nodded approvingly. "Good job. Cleaning up the scene and stalling the enemy's detection."

"I worry that Maipú Meyer will exercise caution. Once Rentas fails to return by midnight, he'll lead his men here and stumble upon the corpse. Then, he might choose to abandon Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and relocate with the remaining members of the Bliss Society. Maybe we don't even have to wait until midnight. Susanna Mattise will undoubtedly prod him if she can find a way to contact him."

Such a turn of events would thwart the forthcoming official Beyonders' raid and leave behind latent dangers.

Franca added, "Fortunately, Susanna won't be able to leave the altar in the next two days, and the altar itself can't sprout legs and flee. At the very least, the official Beyonders can address Charlie's predicament."

"Not necessarily," Lumian countered, "we shouldn't make assumptions about the evil god altar using conventional logic. It's akin to me never fathoming that a man could give birth."

"Huh?" Charlie's confusion escalated as he listened to Ciel and "Red Boots," comprehending each word independently but failing to grasp their interconnected meaning.

Franca fell silent for two seconds before solemnly nodding.

"You're right. The true form of the altar is like a massive tree stump. It might possess life. When the time comes, it can uproot itself and transform into a treant, making its escape with Susanna."

With a clap of her hands, Franca exclaimed, "Exactly! How can it be called a tree spirit without a tree?"

Lumian sensed that Franca's conjecture could be close to the truth.

He recollected wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses at Auberge du Coq Doré, where he had witnessed an extensive underground network of brownish-green roots stretching in all directions.

Emerging from the hole, he retrieved the carbide lamp and the enemy's lantern. He scrutinized the structure of the tunnel's ceiling and the surrounding rock walls. Every now and then, he extended his palm, gently patted and knocked against them.

Confused by Lumian's actions, Franca, eager to leave Underground Trier as soon as possible, asked, "What are you doing?"

Calmly, Lumian replied, "I'm searching for a suitable spot to place a bundle of explosives and bury the corpse completely. We mustn't make too much noise to avoid alerting Susanna, who's deep underground, and Maipú Meyer, who's in Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons on the surface."

Simultaneously, he had to ensure that the ground wouldn't collapse, as it could endanger the buildings above.

Clearly, the municipal workers had diligently reinforced these areas when connecting the underground quarries, sewers, and various tunnels. Regular repairs were carried out, and minor cave-ins posed no threat to the surface's safety or its own integrity.

Using his Hunter powers, Lumian soon identified a depression on the side of the hole and placed a bundle of detonators there.

"Unfortunately, we lack the proper tools and materials. Otherwise, we could set up a trigger for the explosives under the corpse. When Maipú Meyer arrives and tries to lift the body in his agitation, it would go boom," Lumian said with regret, squatting down.

Since consuming the first potion, he hadn't had the opportunity to execute a Hunter's bomb trap and showcase his explosive finesse.

Charlie's heart raced as he listened, confirming Ciel's reputation as the most renowned mob leader of recent times.

"Indeed, a true Hunter," Franca exclaimed, filled with admiration.

Lumian then took out a match, igniting the fuse.

He stood up and began walking toward Franca and Charlie at a steady pace. Passing by the pile of gravel, he tossed the lantern into the tunnel.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Charlie hurriedly warned Lumian as he noticed the fuse nearing its end.

His calf muscles tensed, preparing to leap behind the rock wall to avoid the impending explosion.

Dressed in a simple formal top and cargo pants, Lumian had only covered a distance of seven to eight meters when the detonator erupted behind him.

The tunnel trembled slightly, and the stone wall beside the hole collapsed, burying most of the already unstable opening.

Flames ignited, and gravel scattered, but they didn't reach Lumian's back. They only affected the area two to three meters away from him and in a different direction within the tunnel.

Lumian didn't turn around or evade. He approached Franca, who wore a smile, and Charlie, who stood there dumbfounded.

Franca gave him a thumbs-up and clicked her tongue. "Let's go."

With that, she swiftly turned and headed towards the exit of Underground Trier, the same path they had used to enter.

Black flames silently flickered behind her, igniting the blood on the ground, filling the air with its scent, and engulfing the remnants of red and white.

Charlie's eyes widened, as if he had stepped into a surreal dream.

Only when Lumian patted him on the shoulder did he turn and follow, as if his spirit had abandoned him.

As they ascended towards the surface, Franca grinned and said, "Tomorrow and the day after, we'll discover whether Susanna Mattise and the altar have been completely eradicated, by observing Charlie's situation."

"Whether Susanna Mattise comes searching for him?" Lumian, carrying the carbide lamp, startled Charlie intentionally.

If that were the case, Franca would have said "two days later" instead of "tomorrow or the day after."

Charlie trembled and stammered, "H-h-how?"

Franca chuckled before replying, "If the official Beyonders don't come looking for you, it means you have truly escaped the nightmare called Susanna.

"If they do come and offer you a good position, congratulations. You will have hope entwined with danger."

"W-what do you mean?" Charlie didn't fully grasp the meaning.

Franca didn't explain further and instead inquired, "If you become a quarry policeman with a monthly salary of 300 verl d'or, you'll face conflicts with smugglers, cave explorers, and bounty hunters every day. There's a certain chance of sacrifice. Are you willing?"

"Of course!" Charlie blurted out.

Though being a quarry policeman was perilous, most of them managed to survive!

If Susanna Mattise isn't completely purged, the official Beyonders would offer Charlie a job that would make it easier to protect him. And those positions often come with good pay. Lumian roughly understood Franca's meaning.

The three of them exited Underground Trier, maneuvered through an alley, and crossed a barricade. Taking a secluded route on Rue des Blouses Blanches, they arrived at Franca's sixth-floor apartment.

Franca removed her hood and casually tossed the bag containing their spoils of war beside the coffee table. She half-reclined on the armchair and gestured with a nod towards the sofa and another armchair.

"Now, we must endure until dawn."

After Lumian and Charlie took their seats, the living room fell into an eerie silence.

This made Charlie uneasy. He glanced at Ciel and spoke up, "You actually possess those mystical abilities."

"If not, how could I have slain Margot and Ait, becoming the guardian of Salle de Bal Brise and Auberge du Coq Doré?" Lumian chuckled.

"That's true." Charlie pondered for a moment and found this explanation more acceptable.

As the trio engaged in conversation, the needle of the cuckoo wall clock gradually approached midnight.

Outside the window, the darkness remained undisturbed.

At that moment, faint footsteps resonated from outside the door, approaching swiftly from below.

"Jenna… I forgot she was coming over tonight!" Franca exclaimed, sitting upright.

She glanced at Lumian, then at Charlie. After a brief moment of hesitation, she closed her eyes and waited for Jenna to open the door herself.

With a click, Jenna, dressed in a white blouse and a fluffy beige skirt, used the spare key to enter the apartment.

In an instant, she noticed Lumian and Charlie.

"What's going on?" Jenna couldn't hide her confusion, her gaze shifting between Lumian, Charlie, and Franca.

Franca mustered a forced smile and said, "We were getting bored. We thought of playing Fighting Evil. Want to join us? We have two decks of cards."

Jenna peered suspiciously for a few seconds, sensing that Franca didn't want to disclose the real reason in front of Ciel. She gestured towards the guest room and stated,

"Dammit, it's already late. Why are you still playing cards? I have a packed day tomorrow. I need to get some sleep!"

She waved at Lumian and Charlie before heading towards the guest room.

Lumian gazed at Franca calmly and inquired, "Why didn't you just tell her what we're doing?"

Jenna, too, had fallen victim to the predicament at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. She had nearly been raped by the pervert named Hedsey.

Franca was caught off guard.

"You're right. Why didn't I just say it straightforwardly…"

There was no need to conceal it!

She glanced at the closed door of the guest room, intending to reveal the truth to Jenna later.

Casually, Lumian asked, "What does Jenna usually keep busy with?"

"Don't you know?" Franca's face gradually lit up with satisfaction. "She's an apprentice in acting, studying drama. Sigh, it's not like the old days. I heard in the previous era, apprentices could learn for free as long as they signed a long-term contract. They even received food and accommodation. Nowadays, not only do they have to pay tuition fees, but they also have to cover all expenses themselves."

As Franca spoke, she noticed Lumian's expression turning grave.

Lumian furrowed his brow and inquired, "At which theater is she doing her apprenticeship?"

"I never asked…" Franca murmured, making the connection.

In that instant, Jenna emerged from the guest room, carrying a stack of items as she made her way towards the restroom.

"What theater are you apprenticing at?" Franca stood up and inquired.

Jenna responded with confusion, "Why do you ask? You've never been curious before."

Observing Lumian and Charlie's focused gaze, she couldn't help but curse, "Why the f*ck are you staring at me? Dogsh*t, what does my theater have to do with you?"

Realizing Franca and Lumian’s seriousness, she hesitated for a moment before muttering, “Dammit, there’s no need for me to hide anything! It’s the Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.”

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Chapter 215 - 215 Jenna's Worry

215 Jenna's Worry

As soon as Jenna revealed where she studied acting, a hush fell over the living room. Franca and Lumian exchanged inexplicable glances, causing Jenna to feel a pang of uncertainty. Charlie, the waiter, couldn't conceal his startled expression and the fear that gripped him was evident in his shrinking demeanor and fearful eyes.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?" Jenna asked, her confidence wavering.

Lumian seized the moment and tossed a Louis d'or at Jenna's feet, his eyes intently following her every move, even the slightest flicker in her gaze.

"Dammit! What's the meaning of this?" Jenna looked down at the Louis d'or, her confusion turning into anger as she confronted Lumian.

Lumian's expression returned to normal, and he turned his head, grinning at Franca. "Not a Scrooge."

"Of course!" Franca responded, a mix of exasperation and amusement. "We meet often. She may be a bit frugal, but she's definitely not a Scrooge. Plus, she doesn't exhibit any signs of being a Sex Addict, and her acting skills leave much to be desired."

Franca couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret.

"What are you two talking about?" Jenna was utterly bewildered, forgetting her own penchant for profanity.

"You explain," Lumian instructed Franca.

Franca rose and tried to allow Jenna to squeeze into the recliner with her, but realizing it was too cramped, Jenna opted for an armchair instead, resting a pile of ordinary clothes on her lap.

"Do you remember that creep Hedsey?" Franca slumped back disappointedly in the recliner.

Jenna responded without hesitation, "I remember. Damn it, he died too easily!"

It wasn't exactly an easy demise… Lumian silently muttered, recalling the gruesome state of Hedsey's lower body.

Using this as a starting point, Franca delved into the secrets of the Bliss Society, the dark Sequences tied to the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, the connection between the Bliss Society and the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, and various details involving the true Ive, Rentas, Maipú Meyer, and Susanna Mattise.

Jenna, having absorbed Franca's mystical knowledge, grew increasingly astonished with each revelation. It was as if a door had swung open, revealing a new world—a scene that was entirely different from what she had known before. It festered, exuded sinister vibes, terrified her, and made her stomach churn with disgust.

After Franca finished her account, she blurted out, "Did that creep target me at the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?"

Considering that Hedsey was a subordinate of theater manager Maipú Meyer and associated with the Bliss Society, he likely frequented and surreptitiously entered the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Jenna suspected that the pervert often lurked in the shadows, observing the apprentice actresses during their classes.

"It's possible," Franca agreed, contemplating why the pervert Hedsey didn't choose another underground singer but instead risked attacking Jenna.

Jenna was undeniably attractive. After her time at the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, where she honed her acting and makeup skills, her allure had gradually emerged. However, she wasn't a fully-fledged Witch yet, nor was she overwhelmingly captivating. In the bustling marketplace, there was no shortage of underground singers who were more alluring and could ignite the desires of men of lower standing. Besides, they lacked the distinction of being Red Boots's mistress.

Jenna glared at Lumian, her teeth grinding together in frustration.

Lumian chuckled softly. "I suddenly realized that since we met, you've never praised any orthodox god. I still don't know if you're a follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun or the God of Steam and Machinery. It's rather suspicious."

Jenna scoffed and replied, "Most of the time when I meet you, I'm dressed like this. I wear smoky makeup that symbolizes debauchery and sing, 'My dear, he's really good with his fingers.' If I were to praise the Sun in this state, I believe God would incinerate me."

As she spoke, she pointed to her chest, revealing a generous amount of alluring cleavage.

Without waiting for Lumian's response, she turned her finger towards Franca.

"And Franca never praises any deity either. Why aren't you suspecting her?"

“Who says I don’t?” Franca declared solemnly, drawing a triangular Sacred Emblem on her chest. “By Steam!”

Your acting skills are mediocre… Aurore is the same. She rarely mentions her faith and doesn’t attend Mass. She only praises the Sun when questioned… Lumian drew the triangular Sacred Emblem.

“By Steam!”

Caught up in their actions, Charlie instinctively spread his arms wide.

“Praise the Sun!”

An indescribable silence descended, as if no one knew how to proceed with the conversation.

After a few seconds, Lumian addressed Jenna, saying, “So, your true identity is an apprentice actress.”

Jenna couldn’t help but feel a twinge of satisfaction. She lifted her chin slightly and replied, “Well then, am I qualified to critique your acting skills? And let me clarify, I’m not some low-class hooligan with a vulgar mouth. I’m merely playing the role of an underground songstress. How did I do? Was it convincingly authentic? Can you find any faults?”

“No wonder I occasionally find you rather refined,” Lumian mocked, concurring with Jenna’s statement.

“What do you mean, ‘rather’?” Jenna expressed her dissatisfaction.

Charlie’s gaze darted between their faces, eventually landing on Franca, who sat in the recliner.

Franca pursed her lips and observed Lumian and Jenna as they bickered.

Lumian dismissed Jenna’s bragging and said, “Let’s discuss the Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.”

After a few moments of contemplation, Jenna blurted out in frustration, “Dammit! My tuition fees!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she noticed everyone giving her strange looks.

Jenna hurriedly clarified, “Didn’t you mention that Maipú Meyer might escape with the members of the Bliss Society? Won’t Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons shut down? Damn it, I’ve already paid a year’s worth of tuition fees to these damn heretics! I need to get that money back!”

Once Jenna regained her composure, Lumian’s lips twitched.

“Weren’t you claiming that your foul mouth and low morals were all part of an act?”

“…” At first, Jenna was left speechless, but then she defended herself forcefully. “I am currently Jenna, the underground songstress! I am still in character and haven’t broken free from it…”

Observing Lumian’s skeptical expression, Jenna became enraged with embarrassment.

“Dammit, don’t you understand? This is called method acting!”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Franca chimed in, trying her best to change the subject. “Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons has a dedicated audience and talented actors. Even if the theater manager and a few leads leave, it won’t shut down. At most, they might embezzle funds. It’ll be a bit challenging for them. I believe there will be plenty of people willing to take over such valuable assets. Oh, by the way, who owns Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?”

Jenna recollected and replied, “Maipú Meyer himself.”

“Ah, I see…” Lumian glanced at Franca. “If Maipú Meyer truly intends to escape, we could acquire Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons at a low price. There are numerous dancers and singers under Brignais’s control who don’t want to sell themselves. We can give them an opportunity to earn a living at the theater.”

“They will face fierce competition.” Franca contemplated. “If we succeed, it could indeed be a viable path. The challenge lies in convincing Brignais… Haha, we can spin him a tale and sell him a promise. Let him know that no matter how much he squeezes a singer who moonlights as a street girl, he can only make a pittance. On the other hand, a renowned theater actress under the influence of our Savoie Mob will bring far greater returns.”

Charlie’s gaze shifted between Lumian and Franca before settling on Jenna, who sat in an armchair.

After discussing with Lumian, Franca assured Jenna, “Don’t worry, your tuition fees won’t be in vain.”

Jenna, who had been listening intently to their conversation, let out a sigh of relief and muttered,

“The tuition fees for Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons aren’t cheap at all.”

Franca redirected the conversation back to its original course.

“What’s your impression of the people from Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? Who do you find suspicious?”

Jenna contemplated for a moment before responding, “Maipú Meyer enjoys watching our acting classes. His gaze can be a bit lecherous, but he has never harassed anyone. That’s something many men do, isn’t it? Yes, some apprentices might have a private relationship with him. After all, he’s the theater’s owner and manager.

“Rentas possesses remarkable acting skills. He is the most professional and exceptional among all the acting instructors. The characters he portrays in plays seem to come alive, each one distinct from the others…”

At this point, Jenna’s tone revealed a touch of envy, as if she desired to possess the abilities of an Actor. However, thoughts of Hedsey’s perversity and Susanna Mattise’s current predicament filled her with fear, preventing her from indulging in such fantasies.

“I haven’t really interacted with the Ive you mentioned. Perhaps he only appears in certain genres…

“I’m not well-acquainted with Charlotte. By the time I joined Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, she had already taken on lead roles, but she was my role model. Her acting skills are slightly inferior to Rentas’s. I’m uncertain if she’s an Actor. Dammit, it’s hard to say…”

Jenna struggled to restrain herself for a long while before finally cursing.

“The other acting instructors are probably not Actors. Their acting abilities pale in comparison to Rentas’s. They often praise me for my talent in acting. While I may not match Rentas or the previous female leads of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, I can hold my own against Charlotte when she was still an apprentice…” Jenna suddenly fell silent.

“What’s the matter?” Franca inquired, concerned.

Charlie’s gaze shifted from Franca and Jenna to Ciel, who sat beside him.

Jenna furrowed her brow and said, “Tomorrow, the official Beyonders will conduct a thorough investigation of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. What… what should I do?”

She was a wild Beyonder, an Assassin.

“Abandon Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and find another theater?” Lumian suggested.

Money was the least of her concerns.

Jenna pressed her lips together, her expression filled with dejection.

“B-but I used my true identity at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. What about my mother and brother…”

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Chapter 216 - 216 Acting Guidance

216 Acting Guidance

Lumian wasn't sure if Jenna's bounty would have consequences for her family, so he turned to Franca, hoping she could use her connections to persuade the official Beyonders to overlook a mere apprentice actress.

Franca didn't hide her dilemma.

Helping to hide something was not an issue for someone like 007, but if they expected him to meticulously cover for someone during the operation, two conditions had to be met. First, he had to be involved in the operation and responsible for investigating the apprentice actresses. Second, he needed some information about Jenna to determine whom he should assist.

Franca didn't believe that 007 happened to be in the market district by chance. At best, he could pass on information. The chances of him being directly in charge of the operations were highly unlikely.

"I can try, but I can't make any promises," Franca replied, looking at Jenna with concern, trying to offer some comfort without making any definite commitments.

Jenna acknowledged her words briefly, feeling a bit relieved, but she still struggled to come up with another solution.

Lumian pondered for a moment and said teasingly, "You're just an apprentice actress. Why are you so anxious?

"Even if the official Beyonders investigate everyone in Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, they won't waste much effort on you. Think about it. You've only been in the market district for a short time, and you haven't even become an apprentice actress yet. You don't even have a chance to play a minor supporting role. How could you be a female member of the Bliss Society?"

"That's right," Franca interjected. "You spend most of your time singing in bars and dance halls rather than interacting with the cult of Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. You're in the least suspicious group. If you tell the investigators the truth, you might not have to undergo any further tests of your Beyonder powers."

Lumian added with a smile, "And even if they do test you, it will mainly be to determine if you believe in the Mother Tree of Desire, or if you're a Scrooge or a Sex Addict. And you definitely don't fall into any of those categories.

“This is a blind spot for the official Beyonders during their investigations, and you can take advantage of it.

“Didn’t you mention your excellent acting skills? Now is the time to showcase them!”

“Yes… When the Sun rises, go to église Saint-Robert and pray. Get an accessory that reveals your identity as a believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun, and wear it. When you enter Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, whether or not the official Beyonders arrive, praise the Sun frequently.”

“Evil god believers rarely engage in such actions. It will effectively set you apart from them. If the official Beyonders notice these details, there’s a good chance they’ll consider you trustworthy.”

Jenna’s eyes sparkled as she listened.

“That’s right.

“A devout apprentice actress who believes in the Eternal Blazing Sun and has only recently joined Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons won’t switch to an evil god so easily. They only need to conduct a simple investigation…”

“As long as I lead them to search for Beyonder powers in connection with the believers of the evil god, they probably won’t suspect that I became a Beyonder due to other encounters…”

The more Jenna spoke, the more her excitement grew. She placed the stack of clothes on her lap and stood up.

She paced back and forth, making gestures as if she were embodying a devoted apprentice actress who believed in the Eternal Blazing Sun.

Madame, it appears you’re not a true follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have needed to rehearse beforehand, Lumian clicked his tongue and criticized.

Charlie, who had been listening, was taken aback.

Is “Little Minx” Jenna also someone with magical powers?

Jenna’s performance, even in the presence of imaginary official Beyonders, gradually bolstered her confidence.

Franca observed quietly, her eyes flickering, her mind filled with trivial thoughts.

If Jenna and I possessed the powers of an Actor, we would make perfect cosplayers, capable of becoming anything we desired. Tsk tsk… she thought to herself.

After some time, Jenna regained her composure and looked at Charlie warily.

“I’ve heard that you enjoy giving speeches in bars and twisting other people’s secrets into stories.

“If you dare to f*cking reveal my Beyonder powers, I’ll hand you over to a homosexual Sex Addict. Heh heh, just imagine the suffering you’ll endure.”

Charlie couldn’t help but pause for a moment. He shuddered and raised his right hand.

“Praise the Sun. I swear in God’s name that I won’t divulge your secret!

“I just mentioned that you and Ciel became lovers…”

Charlie suddenly stopped, sensing the strange atmosphere in the living room once again.

Lumian shrugged at Franca, signaling that it was merely a rumor.

Jenna scoffed.

“Will you also spread the rumor that Franca joined Ciel and me to form a stable love triangle?”

“No,” Charlie quickly shook his head.

At the same time, he found the idea rather intriguing. It hadn’t occurred to him before.

Jenna settled back into the armchair and continued to recount her knowledge of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Lumian and Franca listened attentively, occasionally posing questions to guard against potential threats.

…

In Underground Trier.

A figure with a lantern in hand moved cautiously along a familiar path, searching for something.

This person, of average height, wore a black tailcoat, a matching bow tie, and a half top hat. His face had a square shape, with short and thick eyebrows. The lines on his face were etched deep, and he sported a well-groomed brownish-yellow beard, carefully waxed at the tips.

The lantern’s flickering light cast eerie shadows on his countenance, lending him an air of profound melancholy.

After walking for some time, the man halted, his gaze directed towards a section of the tunnel that had suffered a slight cave-in.

His dark brown eyes narrowed, focusing intently for a moment, before he suddenly dropped to all fours, his nose twitching.

The scent of gunpowder… and blood… The man rose solemnly to his feet and approached the collapsed area.

Through the layers of debris, he seemed to discern the glimpse of an incomplete corpse.

…

The atmosphere on Rue des Blouses Blanches was much quieter at night compared to Rue Anarchie. Except for the occasional clamor caused by passing carriages and the inebriated stumbling their way home, the night seemed to have fallen into a stillness.

From time to time, a distant gunshot would break the silence, its echo piercing through the night only to be swallowed by the darkness and moonlight.

Lumian and his companions engaged in intermittent conversation, their nerves on edge, apprehensive that shadows might suddenly emerge from the darkness beyond the window.

Time dragged on slowly. For Charlie, it felt like awaiting a verdict. He was restless, anxious, yet filled with a glimmer of hope.

Finally, the distant skyline began to be tinged with a golden-red hue. Before long, the entire night was bathed in the crimson light.

“We should be safe now,” Franca declared, sitting upright in her recliner.

Lumian glanced at Charlie and noticed that his luck was no longer drenched in blood-red. It had returned to its normal state, and there were even hints of prosperity.

The immediate crisis has been averted, but if Susanna Mattise manages to escape, will Charlie obtain a position with the authorities? Lumian pondered over it and nodded.

“For the time being, all I can say is that we should be fine.”

Through this encounter, he confirmed one thing: even without the Luck Transference Spell, human luck could change.

He felt that the future was shaped by multiple factors. Different choices could lead to diverse outcomes.

If Lumian had followed Osta Trul and provided protection instead of forewarning him of impending disaster, perhaps he wouldn't have suffered injuries. However, that didn't guarantee a turn for the better. Lumian's protection might have implicated Osta Trul, leading him to be dragged to the river's depths by another water ghost, losing his life.

Does inevitability imply that regardless of the choices one makes, a predetermined fate will inevitably manifest? Lumian turned his gaze towards Jenna, the underground songstress and apprentice actress.

Jenna possessed average luck—neither filled with fortuitous encounters nor beset by grave dangers.

In high spirits, Jenna furrowed her brow and asked, "Why are you staring at me?"

After a night of acclimatizing, she refrained from uttering vulgarities and put more thought into her words.

Lumian pointed to his eye sockets.

"Are you planning to go to Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons looking like that?"

"Oh, right! I haven't taken off my makeup!" Jenna exclaimed, getting up and rushing into the washroom with a stack of clothes.

Franca stood up and stretched, paying no mind to her appearance.

She glanced at the washroom and whispered to Lumian, "Will the act be convincing?"

"Yes," Lumian replied with confidence.

Previously, he hadn't been entirely sure, but after observing Jenna's current state of luck, he was more certain.

Franca chose to place her trust in Lumian.

"I'll keep a close watch on her as well."

She clicked her tongue and let out a sigh.

"You seem rather skilled at deceiving the official Beyonders. Just as I expected from a…"

She mouthed the final words silently—"wanted criminal."

Not just deceiving the official Beyonders… Lumian whispered to himself, pointing at Charlie.

“I’ll take him back to Auberge du Coq Doré to rest, just in case the official Beyonders can’t locate him. I’ll leave Jenna in your care.”

“You make it sound like she’s truly your lover. Asking me to look after her,” Franca retorted with a sour tone.

By the time Jenna finished removing her makeup and changing her clothes, Lumian and Charlie had already departed. Franca had also informed 007 about the altar, the Actors, and the other information she had gathered.

At that moment, Jenna’s face was no longer adorned with smoky eyes, pronounced blush, and fiery lips. She appeared clean-faced, albeit a bit fatigued.

As Jenna braided her brownish-yellow hair, she glanced at the door and grinned at Franca.

“When did you become involved with Ciel? Aren’t you afraid the Boss will find out?”

Franca chuckled.

“Him? It’ll be far too sinful; I can’t bring myself to do it.”

“Why?” Jenna couldn’t comprehend.

To her understanding, Franca’s moral boundaries weren’t that strict. Ciel was only a few months away from adulthood.

Franca pondered her words and responded, “After getting to know him better, I discovered that he’s the younger brother of one of my relatives.”

“So you’re related by blood.” Jenna nodded in understanding.

However, her attention quickly shifted. After securing her braids, she pointed towards the door.

“I’m going to église Saint-Robert to offer my prayers.”

“I’ll follow you discreetly to ensure nothing untoward happens.” Franca retrieved some fluorescent powder and, with an incantation, blended it in to conceal herself.

When will I become a Witch… Jenna averted her gaze enviously, opened the door, and stepped outside.

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Chapter 217 - 217 Notarization

217 Notarization

église Saint-Robert stood proudly near the Suhit steam locomotive station, serving as the bishop cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Its distinctive onion-shaped dome was painted in shimmering gold, representing the radiant sun. Below it stood a white building with gilded edges and a monumental Sun Sacred Emblem.

Adjacent to the cathedral was a bell tower, crowned by a roof fashioned from a gleaming golden sphere.

Observing Jenna entering the cathedral amidst the morning prayer congregation, Franca opted to wait in close proximity.

Uncertain whether the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral possessed any peculiar enchantments that could render her invisibility ineffective, she remained cautious, unwilling to take any unnecessary risks.

église Saint-Robert, much like other cathedrals belonging to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, boasted a resplendent golden base and was adorned with gilded accents throughout. The ornate structure, adorned with vibrant stained glass windows and a vast mural depicting a saint in vivid hues of blue, green, and red, exuded an atmosphere of profound sanctity and grandeur. Every worshiper who entered its hallowed halls couldn’t help but bow their heads in reverence, enveloped by the sacred ambiance.

Jenna made her way to the front of the altar and settled into the second row of seats.

Closing her eyes, she inclined her head forward and crossed her arms, placing them reverently upon her chest.

Having been baptized and frequented the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral since her youth, Jenna was intimately familiar with this customary ritual, even though she could hardly be considered devout. She swiftly cleared her mind of any distracting thoughts, focusing her entire being on the act of prayer.

Time seemed to stand still as the bishop delivered his sermon.

After nearly fifteen minutes, Jenna opened her eyes and quietly rose to her feet. She proceeded towards a long table positioned along the side of the main hall.

This table spanned an impressive length of 20 to 30 meters, adorned with slender white candles flickering within golden lamps.

Devotees seeking to express their gratitude or admiration for a saint or angel could purchase a candle from the clergyman stationed beside the table, lighting it and placing it within an unoccupied lamp.

Jenna fixed her gaze upon the softly swaying flames for a few fleeting moments before redirecting her attention towards the clergyman dressed in a white robe interwoven with threads of gold.

Her eyes caught sight of a man engaging in the purchase of candles.

He appeared to be in his late twenties, his blond hair immaculately styled and subtly enhanced with cosmetics. His eyes resembled the vivid azure of a tranquil lake, albeit relatively small in size.

Adorned in a white shirt, a yellow vest, and a slim blue tweed coat adorned with two golden buttons, he bore a resemblance to the slightly distinguished gentlemen of Trier, with discernible traces of makeup enhancing his features.

As the man approached an unoccupied lamp with his acquired candle, Jenna moved closer to the clergyman in the resplendent white robe interwoven with golden threads, extending her arms in a welcoming gesture.

“Praise the Sun!”

“Praise the Sun!” the clergyman warmly replied, his smile radiating genuine warmth.

Jenna hesitated briefly for a couple of seconds before uttering, “I seek a blessed necklace.”

Comparing it to the purchase of candles, this act was more devout.

But, naturally, it came with a higher price tag.

“Sister, how about this one?”

He produced a necklace adorned with a gold Sunbird pendant from among the unsold white candles.

Two rose-red rubies were nestled within the eyes of the Sunbird.

In the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, just as “Brother” was used to address men of the faith, female believers were affectionately called “Sisters.” Some nuns even formed an alliance known as the Nine Sisters Association, working hand in hand with the Brotherhood Minor.

Jenna couldn’t help but sense that this particular necklace must be quite expensive—she could almost hear her wallet crying in protest.

After careful consideration, she ultimately settled on a relatively simple amulet featuring a small Sun Sacred Emblem.

It set her back 30 verl d’or, causing her to wince at the cost.

As an underground singer in the market district, Jenna earned a decent income, especially since her recent rise in popularity. However, it had only been a month since she began gaining recognition. Previously, her earnings were barely sufficient to cover rent, food, performance attire, makeup supplies, and the like, without having to rely on her family for financial support.

Despite now earning nearly 300 verl d’or a month through part-time work, her financial situation still left her feeling uneasy. She had to save for next year’s tuition, ensure her mother wouldn’t worry, and even contribute to the family’s debts.

With the newly acquired amulet adorning her neck, Jenna took a deep breath and departed from église Saint-Robert, making her way to Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons before 9 a.m.

The classroom for apprentice actresses was located on the second floor, and Jenna passed by the manager’s office on her way.

The door remained tightly shut, indicating that Maipú Meyer hadn’t arrived at the theater yet.

Could he have really fled? Jenna averted her gaze and continued forward.

Shortly thereafter, she walked past the locked door of the exclusive break room belonging to the popular leading actress, Charlotte Calvino.

The door was locked as well.

Jenna exhaled quietly, straightened her posture, and turned into the classroom.

She was late. Gaspar, the instructor for today’s first acting class, had already arrived and was busy addressing a private question from one of the apprentices.

Gaspar, despite being a middle-aged man of dignified demeanor, had the ability to portray a charming playboy on stage.

…

Deep within Underground Trier, nestled within a hollow strewn with remnants of tree branches and vines…

The very center had collapsed, leaving the soil in a state of disarray. Faint marks, as if from hurried footsteps, led towards an unknown destination.

Angoulême de Fran?ois followed the path indicated by the cardinals and found himself standing at the precipice, his eyes fixed on the bewildering sight before him.

Those filthy rodents had relocated once more!

In response to the signal from the cardinals, Angoulême unsheathed a golden longsword that appeared to be forged from condensed light from a grayish-white mechanical doll.

With a swift motion, the sword plunged into the ground, causing the bluish-green and withered branches and vines to erupt into flames. Yet, no trace of black smoke ascended.

As the fiery shroud dissipated, the true nature of the ground, walls, and ceiling came into view for Angoulême and his companions.

A multitude of serpents, slimy and cold, writhed and entwined, engaging in frenzied mating rituals. Countless gray rats tore at each other relentlessly, refusing to retreat until death claimed them. Diverse insects devoured leaves and soil with such voracity that they burst open from overindulgence…

…

As the realization dawned upon Franca that the plainclothes police had covertly sealed off Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, she swiftly withdrew from the brick-red three-story edifice and sought refuge in a nearby side alley. From her concealed vantage point, she observed the situation unfolding on the second floor.

As the first acting lesson neared its end, Jenna couldn't help but notice the conspicuous absence of Maipú Meyer, who typically lingered by the classroom door.

Just then, a group of black-uniformed police officers entered, clutching lists in their hands.

The leader called for a momentary pause in the lecture and addressed the assembled individuals.

"Maipú Meyer has been confirmed as a heinous heretic. We must ascertain your faith."

Gasps and exclamations erupted, momentarily plunging the scene into disarray.

"Silence!" bellowed the leading officer. "I shall read out your names, and you will sign this pledge as a witness before God. No one shall deceive."

Ascertaining of faith… Jenna's racing heart found a measure of solace.

One by one, the teachers and apprentice actresses stepped forward, receiving a pledge form from one of the police officers. They diligently completed their declarations of faith, appending their signatures to solidify their commitment.

Before long, Jenna heard her own name being called.

"Celia Bello."

She approached with composure, collecting a pledge form and a scarlet fountain pen.

The contents of the pledge were as follows:

"I solemnly swear that my faith in the ____ remains unyielding to this day.

"Affirmer: ____

"Notary: ____

Jenna filled in the first two blanks with "Eternal Blazing Sun" and "Celia Bello" respectively before returning the completed pledge and the fountain pen to the police.

Once all the actors and apprentices had signed the pledge, they were instructed to remain confined within the classroom, rehearsal room, and other designated areas until further notice, unable to venture beyond those confines.

…

Within the manager's office that had previously been occupied by Maipú Meyer, a gathering took place to collect the signed pledges.

Several devout members of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, known as Beyonders, took turns wielding a fountain pen crafted from pure gold. With deliberate strokes, they inscribed the initials "D.E." in the designated Notary space.

The ink they used appeared to be a vivid shade of crimson, reminiscent of fresh blood.

Upon the completion of each pledge, a shimmering golden aura would briefly envelop the document before dissipating back to its original state.

Every so often, a pledge would emit an ominous, blood-red glow, accompanied by piercing screams emanating from the same floor.

Even those actors and apprentices who employed aliases, long-established pseudonyms recognized by those in their midst, possessed mystical connections that were intricately intertwined.

…

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 504.

Charlie lay restless in bed, his weariness unable to lull him into sleep.

All of a sudden, a knock echoed through the room.

“Who’s there?” Charlie called out, startled, as he sat up in bed, resembling a startled bird.

“Angoulême de Fran?ois.” The voice from beyond the door was deep, yet carried a compelling warmth.

Charlie’s mind immediately conjured the image of the Monsieur who had interrogated him about Madame Alice’s demise. Hastily, he rose from his bed and swung the door open.

Standing before him were Angoulême, with his blond hair, golden brows, and beard, and Imre, whose brown skin and full lips bore the traces of Southern Continent heritage.

“What brings you here, Monsieur Fran?ois?” Charlie inquired cautiously.

Simultaneously, a thought flashed across his mind.

Could these be the official Beyonders whom Ciel and Red Boots mentioned?

Angoulême did not immediately respond. He stepped into Charlie’s room, gesturing for Imre to shut the wooden door behind them.

Casting a sweeping glance around, he finally spoke.

“I bring bad news. Susanna Mattise is not entirely deceased. She may appear before you at any time in the future.”

Charlie couldn’t conceal his disappointment, pain, confusion, and fear.

“What should I do?”

Angoulême nodded gently.

“But there is good news as well. We intend to offer you a clerical position within our ranks. This will provide you with enhanced protection.

“Your monthly salary will amount to 320 verl d’or, and there will be a confidentiality agreement in place as compensation. For the initial one or two months, you will need to undergo an Intisian improvement course. Consider it an internship period, with a stipend of 200 verl d’or. Once you successfully pass the assessment, you will become a full-time employee.

“Are you willing? We do not wish to force this proposal upon you.”

320 verl d’or per month? And improved protection? These words echoed within Charlie’s mind. He believed that no ordinary person could turn down such a remarkable opportunity.

He was satisfied even with his current job as an attendant, which earned him 80 verl d’or monthly!

Recalling the hints dropped by Lumian and Franca, Charlie responded with surprise and delight, “Absolutely no problem!”

…

By the window of Room 207, Lumian positioned himself in front of a wooden table, observing Charlie as he followed the two strangers towards Avenue du Marché.

He focused his attention, seeking any changes in Charlie’s luck, but found none.

This meant that the two individuals were not Actors manipulating the situation!

Lumian’s gaze then shifted to the blond man, intrigued to discover what kind of fortune the official Beyonder possessed.

Suddenly, an intense wave of danger washed over him. He instinctively crouched down, reducing his profile.

Angoulême turned his head, his eyes filled with confusion, as he looked at the Auberge du Coq Doré’s windows.

He sensed that someone was observing him.

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Chapter 218 - 218 Promise

218 Promise

After Charlie and the two official Beyonders departed Rue Anarchie, Lumian settled back down at the wooden table, berating himself internally.

How could I forget? I mustn't gaze upon what I ought not to!

The same applied to observing luck!

Previously, he believed that scrutinizing one's luck was a subtle affair, unlikely to be detected. Neither Sequence 7 Franca nor the equivalent of a Sequence 7, "Black Scorpion" Roger, had noticed anything awry. However, the previous official Beyonder had displayed an unmistakable reaction.

Does his Sequence far exceed mine, or does he possess special abilities, or perhaps he wields a corresponding mystical item? Lumian struggled to determine.

He had never observed Beyonders beyond Sequence 7, lacking a point of comparison. Whether it was Gardner Martin or Mr. K, he exercised caution and refrained from examining their luck in their presence.

Having taken note of the lesson, Lumian, who didn't require sleep, perused the copied grimoire of Aurore.

The sunlight grew more intense, transforming the window into a radiant source. Even the bustling Rue Anarchie appeared like a golden oil painting.

In comparison to Backlund, the capital of the Loen Kingdom, Trier remained bathed in sunlight. Despite its pollution, the city's industrial layout was relatively sensible, confining the impact to specific areas. Most of it lay to the south, where factories were abundant.

Knock, knock, knock!

Someone rapped on Room 207 once again, yet this time, Lumian failed to discern any footsteps.

Arching his right eyebrow, he stowed away the papers on the table and turned toward the door.

"Come in. It's unlocked, Madame Red Boots."

With a creak, the door swung open, and Franca stepped inside, donning a blouse, beige trousers, and red boots.

In surprise, she inquired, “How did you know it was me?”

Why ask the same question as Jenna? Should I praise her for being a worthy student of an Assassin like you? Lumian replied, amused, “Because I possess a brain.”

“Don’t make it sound like I lack one,” Franca responded calmly, settling herself on Lumian’s bed.

Lumian chortled.

“I can’t think of anyone else capable of approaching my room without my notice and knocking on the door politely.”

Naturally, he had to exclude Madam Magician first. She lacked such diligence. It was impressive enough that she managed to reply in time!

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian inquired, “Has Jenna’s predicament been resolved?”

Franca clicked her tongue. “You have an uncanny foresight, brat.”

She assumed the role of an elder sister.

If Jenna is still in danger, how could you, Hidden Blade, find the composure to seek me out?

Franca laughed dryly.

“I was referring to your astute guess that the authorized Beyonders would primarily investigate whether Jenna and the others are followers of evil gods.”

After all, I’m closer to an evil god than any evil god believer here… Lumian raised his right hand and gently patted his left chest.

With a smile, he responded, “Such insights stem from the ample experiences of a wanted criminal.”

“You seem quite proud,” Franca teased.

Curious, Lumian inquired, “How did the authorized Beyonders conduct their investigations?”

The more he learned, the more confident he would become in evading similar inquiries in the future.

Franca responded with an air of indifference, “Based on Jenna’s account, I reckon they utilized the powers of a Notary.”

“Each person had to sign a pledge of their faith, a pledge witnessed by a Notary. Heh heh, those who lied were engulfed in burning golden flames. They bled profusely and were dragged away.”

Aware that Lumian was still delving into the realm of mysticism, Franca proceeded to provide a detailed explanation,

“Notary-related abilities are quite common in Trier. They can be found in various places, disguised under different guises.

“Notaries have the ability to create contracts with mystical effects. Once the parties affix their signatures to a similar contract in the presence of a Notary, they are bound by it unless they are demigods. Even at the demigod level, breaking the contract requires a substantial price. For transactions involving millions, or even tens of millions, of verl d’or, both parties are willing to pay a hefty sum and receive notarization in front of the God of Deeds’ Sacred Emblem at a cathedral.

“The pledge is a special contract.”

“The Eternal Blazing Sun is also known as the God of Deeds and the Guardian of Businesses.”

It aligns with Aurore’s grimoires… Lumian inquired, “Has Jenna returned home?”

Franca nodded subtly. “She needed to catch up on sleep.”

Franca scrutinized Lumian. “You seem lively. I can’t tell that you haven’t slept all night.”

“I’m accustomed to it.” Lumian couldn’t reveal that his condition would automatically restore itself at six in the morning. “You also appear quite energetic.”

Franca smirked and replied, “I’m accustomed to it as well. For people like us, the night is the beginning of revelry.”

If Aurore had made that statement, words like “inspiration,” “drafts,” and “tranquility of the night” would have crossed Lumian’s mind. However, when Franca said it, he could only associate it with “orgies,” “large beds,” and “romping.”

Unaware of his critical thoughts, Franca continued, “Apprentice training at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons will be suspended for three days. The theater will be temporarily occupied by the police headquarters. The daily performances will carry on as usual to avoid impacting the National Convention elections. However, the repertoire will be adjusted. Some plays have lost their female leads.”

“Charlotte and Maipú Meyer are gone?” Lumian asked.

Though he had suspected that Susanna Mattise hadn’t been completely purified when Charlie left with the official Beyonders, he still felt a tinge of disappointment upon hearing Franca’s account.

Franca nodded.

“Apart from them, two others are missing: the real Ive and Lolth.”

“Among the remaining actors and apprentices, a total of seven have converted to the Mother Tree of Desire. They were exposed, but it seems none of them received any boons.”

So, those who received boons have fled, while the mere believers have been abandoned? Lumian scoffed inwardly as he relayed Charlie’s departure with the suspected official Beyonders to Franca.

Franca let out a soft sigh.

“This is the best outcome for him. We can’t protect him every single day.

“Though the official Beyonders can’t either, they can arrange for Charlie to stay in a relatively safe place until Susanna Mattise’s matter is truly resolved.

“In comparison, you’re in more danger. Didn’t you mention that Susanna Mattise holds a grudge against you? Evil spirits can be quite fixated.”

That will give me a good chance to test Mr. K’s finger… Lumian silently muttered, indicating that he would be cautious.

Something crossed his mind, and he inquired, “Do you know why our Savoie Mob supports Hugues Artois?”

Franca smiled. “If I had that figured out, I wouldn’t be part of the Savoie Mob anymore.”

Hmm… Is that her primary reason for joining the Savoie Mob? Lumian pondered.

Franca stretched, stood up, and addressed him, “We truly have a chance to acquire Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons at a low price, but we might have to face the enmity of those Scrooges. However, you have nothing to fear. Yes, I’ll go to Rue des Fontaines to discuss with Gardner and resolve my problem while there.”

“What problem?” Lumian was puzzled.

Franca responded with a smile, “Even though the desires Rentas evoked were suppressed by the mysticism smelling salts, my body still feels a bit restless. When I recall that sensation, I feel somewhat empty, longing for fulfillment and release. Since you can’t help me, I have no choice but to find my true lover. Why aren’t

you affected at all?"

There were indeed residual effects, but I was fine after six in the morning… Lumian pursed his lips and replied, "My willpower is stronger than yours."

Franca sneered, walked towards the door, and exited Room 207.

Lumian watched her leave, deep in thought.

Has Franca become the Boss's mistress, or has the Boss become Franca's lover?

Is Franca responsible for satisfying the Boss, or is the Boss responsible for satisfying Franca?

Just before noon, Charlie returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He packed his meager belongings into his suitcase and descended the stairs with it.

Spotting Lumian on the second floor, he glanced around and lowered his voice.

"I have a new job and need to move elsewhere. After some time, I should be able to return to the basement bar for a drink."

Lumian smirked once again. "Sounds good."

If Susanna Mattise's issue could truly be resolved, Charlie's fate would change.

Charlie also seemed pleased. He pondered for a moment and stated, "There are many things I can't tell you, but when the time comes, I'll try to drop hints for you."

In the Inquisition beneath église Saint-Robert, he had come across Ciel's wanted poster and recognized his friend, yet he didn't inform Deacon Fran?ois.

What does that mean? Why does Charlie suddenly feel he can be useful? Does his new job have a close connection to the official Beyonders, allowing him to gather valuable information? Lumian swiftly formed a hypothesis.

With a mischievous grin, he remarked, "First, focus on staying alive before contemplating anything else! I might leave the market district in a few weeks."

The implication of his words was, "Do your job well and don't even think about leaking information. Don't attempt it unless your life is truly at stake."

Whether Charlie understood or not, Lumian wasn't entirely certain. After all, this guy wasn't very smart.

…

After spending the afternoon at Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian changed into a grayish-blue worker's uniform and donned a dark-blue cap. He hailed a public carriage to take him to Rue des Pavés in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

As per his arrangement with Louis Lund, Lumian anticipated a response from Madame Pualis regarding their meeting before the night fell.

Upon reaching the lobby of Apartment 9, Lumian opened the letterbox in Room 302, only to find a collection of fliers inside.

The letter hasn't arrived? Lumian suppressed his anxiety and decided to wait across from Apartment 9.

Just as he exited the lobby and descended the stairs to the roadside, he noticed a brown four-wheeled carriage approaching from a distance. It came to a halt right in front of him.

The carriage driver had jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes. He sported dark red attire, yellow trousers, a polished hat, and a white cravat. It was Louis Lund!

In the next instant, the carriage door swung open noiselessly, revealing the figure of a woman seated within.

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Chapter 219 - 219 Probing

219 Probing

Lumian's eyes locked with Louis Lund, who occupied the driver's seat of the carriage, and received a confirmation nod.

Drawing a deep breath, Lumian strode toward the four-wheeled carriage, crouched down, and entered it.

He grasped the gravity of the situation.

Madame Pualis, cautious and aware, refrained from responding through letters. Instead, she concealed herself near 9 Rue des Pavés, anticipating Lumian's arrival for the reply. This strategy effectively minimized the risk of being trailed and cornered.

In the blink of an eye, Lumian's attention was seized by a familiar figure.

Adorned in a meticulously tailored black corset dress and a slightly mischievous lady's round hat, she exuded an elusive allure. Her untamed brows, lively brown eyes, and moist lips radiated a sense of allure. A cascade of brown hair, half-up and half-down, graced her shoulders. Although informal, her elegance, immaculateness, and enchantment remained undeniable. She was none other than Pualis de Roquefort, the wife of Cordu's administrator.

"Long time no see," Madame Pualis greeted him with a smile, yet her eyes emitted a frigid glare, sending shivers down one's spine.

Simultaneously, Lumian observed a shift in his surroundings.

The carriage vanished, leaving him stranded in a desolate wilderness.

There was nothing before him, and Madame Pualis had vanished into thin air.

Just as Lumian marveled at this bewildering turn of events, a colossal, irregular shadow emerged on the ground.

Instinctively, he raised his gaze, met by a reflection of brown feathers.

Each plume rivaled the size of his head, assembling into a pair of wings that seemed to obscure the heavens.

These wings belonged to Madame Pualis herself, who grew in stature, hovering in mid-air. Her feet transformed into avian talons, glistening with a chilling gleam.

A majestic, ethereal voice resounded.

“You should have been buried with Cordu!”

Lumian’s heart constricted. Gripping his revolver, he swiftly pivoted and sprinted toward the edge of the wilderness.

If the visions within this dream held even an ounce of truth, he could escape Paramita once he reached its limits!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Lumian maneuvered in a curved path, firing rounds into the air. This constituted his sole means of long-range assault.

Despite her immense size, Madame Pualis displayed remarkable dexterity. The gusts generated by her flapping wings disrupted the bullets’ trajectory, enabling her to deftly reposition herself.

An ear-splitting screech emanated from her throat.

Ahead of Lumian, the earth beneath the wilderness upheaved, soil cascading away, unveiling yet another monstrous entity.

A repugnant odor filled the air as the python’s entire body writhed with yellow pus and deformed worms.

Bloodshot eyes glared condescendingly at Lumian. Translucent silkworms squirmed in and out of its hollowed eye sockets.

The serpent’s gaze landed condescendingly on Lumian before it lunged over, its maw open wide, its yellowed fangs aimed at the living prey.

Lumian’s head spun from the putrid stench that permeated the air. With haste, he withdrew a sheet of drawing paper from his shirt and unfolded it.

A vibrant, golden-red sun adorned its surface.

Instantly, the surroundings grew warmer, and the sky, once obscured by Madame Pualis, brightened.

The long-deceased python averted its gaze from Lumian, seemingly unwilling to face the sun’s brilliance.

Yet, its attacks merely slowed rather than ceased.

Seizing the opportunity, Lumian pivoted, clutching the drawing, and darted off in another direction.

Hovering mid-air, Madame Pualis parted her lips, uttering a sinister phrase unintelligible to Lumian.

An immediate weakness washed over Lumian, diminishing his running speed, as if a grave illness had befallen him, leaving him yet to convalesce.

Right on the heels of that, Madame Pualis raised her head, emitting a sharp, pained howl.

At that moment, Lumian perceived an ethereal shattering sound.

It reverberated within his soul and body, casting a veil of darkness over his vision, propelling him toward the threshold of death.

Had it not been for Hunter, Provoker, Dancer, and Alms Monk fortifying his constitution from various angles, Lumian might have succumbed to his enfeebled state.

Clutching onto his last vestiges of reason, Lumian endured the agonizing pain, mustering his dwindling strength to reach into his pocket and brush Mr. K's finger.

In an instant, he felt the refreshing touch of raindrops nourishing his body and soul.

His injuries swiftly mended at a visible pace, while the surrounding wilderness gradually dissolved into illusion until it vanished entirely.

Lumian caught sight of Madame Pualis seated opposite him in the carriage.

The chill had evaporated from her gaze, replaced by a sneering mockery.

"With your feeble strength, you aspire to seek revenge against Guillaume Bénet?"

"When I departed Cordu Village, he gained a new boon after driving away us believers in the Great Mother. He now stands on par with a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator. In the future, he may even procure the corresponding potion for consumption."

Was her earlier attack merely a test of my capabilities? Lumian harbored no surprise at the padre's Sequence 5 status. After all, his contracted abilities far surpassed those of a Contractee, yet he clearly lacked godhood. That left only two possibilities: Sequence 6 or Sequence 5.

Considering Guillaume Bénet's performance in the dream and his clash against Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, Lumian had long suspected him to be a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator. Now, Madame Pualis had confirmed his suspicions.

What astonished him was that Recipients could consume potions to acquire additional abilities. However, they must choose the appropriate potion or a suitable alternative.

Lumian pondered for a moment, concluding that such occurrences were to be expected.

Beyonders themselves could receive boons; it was just that the process carried various complications.

Lumian met Madame Pualis's gaze and responded calmly, "I still have time to grow, and there's a chance for me to become stronger. However, Guillaume Bénet has little hope of attaining godhood. He doesn't believe in the three entities that the Great Mother is a part of. I'll catch up to him as soon as I can."

Unspoken by Lumian were his hopes of acquiring more formidable allies. Being an evil god's Blessed and having offended a follower of the Great Mother, Guillaume Bénet couldn't find many companions. They were likely wild Beyonders and Recipients who also believed in Inevitability.

Madame Pualis chuckled.

"Confidence is a good trait. I admire young people like you who are full of confidence. Would you like to join me and worship the Great Mother? By doing so, you can gain additional assistance. Apart from the power of the potion, you can also receive boons."

"I'd rather not become pregnant and have children," Lumian declined Madame Pualis's kind offer in a tactful manner.

Madame Pualis smiled and replied, "It seems you haven't yet experienced the holiness, preciousness, and joy of life and the wonders of new beginnings. It's something I only came to fully comprehend after giving birth.

"But there's no need for you to refuse now. When you come to understand the greatness of the Mother, you can approach me anytime."

Lumian didn't wish to dwell on matters concerning the Great Mother, so he changed the subject.

"I thought you got others to have children. I didn't expect you to have one yourself."

Madame Pualis's face glowed with a maternal radiance.

"After becoming a Banshee, I had to bear a child myself in order to draw closer to the Great Mother."

It's hard to believe that you were once a man… Lumian almost hesitated to meet Madame Pualis's gaze. He swiftly redirected the conversation with a casual question.

"Did your child perish in the castle?"

“Yes,” Madame Pualis sighed. “His father killed him with his own hands. Regrettably, he was unaware that the child was his.”

“Who?” Lumian blurted out.

Madame Pualis smiled.

“Guillaume Bénet. Didn’t you witness our affair? He didn’t notice, but I knew you were hiding behind the altar. I even considered inviting you to join us.”

I assumed your affair was merely symbolic… Some of it was real? Lumian was taken aback as several images flickered in his mind:

Madame Pualis and the padre entangled in their nakedness.

Madame Pualis praising the padre’s audacity, forthrightness, and masculinity.

The padre having Saint Sith put up with the transgression…

Noticing Lumian’s change in expression, Madame Pualis smiled and continued, “After arriving in Cordu and familiarizing myself with the surroundings, the first thing I did was seduce Guillaume Bénet.

“He held true authority as a clergyman and was the only means for Cordu to connect with the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. If I could bring him down and make him a believer of the Great Mother, combined with Béost’s identity, I could have truly established Cordu as my territory without arousing suspicion from the outside world.

“Coincidentally, I also needed a child. So, I decided to put him to the test. Within a week, I secured his bloodline as a contingency plan. However, around July or August of last year, his attitude suddenly changed, and he lost interest in the Great Mother. Unfortunately, I didn’t even have the opportunity to let him bear a child for me to experience the wonders of life.”

“Last July or August?” Lumian repeated.

Every year, shepherds returned to the mountains during May and June.

“Yes, I remember it vividly,” Madame Pualis chuckled. “Later, that fool Louis Lund even attempted to seek his assistance.”

Lumian furrowed his brow and asked, “Why did the padre’s attitude change all of a sudden?”

“I’m not entirely sure. All I know is that during that time, some villagers were spreading distorted ideas about horoscopes, and they were reported to Guillaume Bénet. After interrogating those individuals, Guillaume Bénet’s demeanor gradually shifted.” Madame Pualis’s eyes seemed to reflect the sunlight dancing on a lake’s surface.

“Who were they?” Lumian pressed.

Madame Pualis smiled in response. “Nazélie and the others—people you are familiar with.”

Lumian fell silent for a few seconds before speaking again, “Where were you, and what were you doing when the padre and the others attacked the castle?”

Pualis let out a brisk laugh.

“So, you finally ask. You should have already guessed the answer, right?”

She gazed at Lumian with a pained and twisted smile.

“Aurore attacked me.”

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Chapter 220 - 220 Nightmare

220 Nightmare

“Aurore attacked me.”

The words echoed in Lumian’s ears, crashing through his mind like a burst dam. A surge of memories flooded in, washing away the hidden horrors buried beneath the surface. They were ghastly, painful, and pierced his very bones.

One by one, scenes played out before Lumian’s eyes. Guillaume Bénet, the padre, encircled by a horde of undead figures in the wilderness. Madame Pualis soaring through the air with her wings spread wide. And there, in her eyes, Lumian caught a glimpse of a familiar blond figure.

It was Aurore!

Lumian’s gaze shifted to the castle’s third-floor walls, covered in translucent faces of bluish-white hue. He witnessed Louis Lund giving birth, Sybil Berry being reborn within the body of a lady’s maid, Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, Pons Bénet, and a group of believers of Inevitability engaged in a fierce battle against the midwife, Administrator Béost, and their companions.

All of this unfolded within Lumian’s own visions, emanating from a small bubble floating in the air.

White Paper…

White Paper!

Lumian’s face contorted in agony as he staggered backward.

Bluish-purple veins, densely packed, protruded from his body, each representing a blood vessel.

Meanwhile, the words of Psychiatrist Susie flashed through his mind: “Always remind yourself not to overreact. Whenever you feel a similar surge of emotions, take deep breaths and find your calm…”

Lumian gasped heavily, feeling as though the world around him had turned into a vacuum.

In an act of sympathy, Madame Pualis spoke, “You have indeed forgotten many things. No, you’ve buried them deep in your heart, afraid to confront them.

“I, too, suffered. It was not pleasant for me. After becoming a Banshee, it was the first time I encountered a woman who truly touched my heart. She possessed charm, kindness, gentleness, and a vibrant spirit. I never imagined that she, as a follower of the evil god, would turn against me.

“Even then, she was already a Fate Appropriator, favored by Inevitability more than Guillaume Bénet.”

Lumian couldn’t help but bring his hands to his head, as if it might explode from the intense pressure within.

Taking deep breaths, he recalled Aurore, who brushed off his concerns about the village’s peculiarities. He remembered her cautioning him against laying eyes on forbidden things. He thought of Aurore, who would often sit on the roof at night, gazing at the vastness of the cosmos. The dream of the diaphanous “lizard” crawling out of Aurore’s mouth resurfaced in his mind. He remembered how Nazélie and the others, the initiators of the horoscope heresy, had close ties to Aurore.

Amidst these recollections, Lumian also recalled his failure to avenge Reimund and Ava’s deaths, discovering himself captured by Pons Bénet instead. He endured torment before finally being set free. He recalled Aurore, who had cut the livre bleu and assembled a plea for help together with him. He remembered Aurore explaining the mystical knowledge she possessed. And above all, he remembered Aurore pushing him off the altar during the ritual, her eyes flickering with a newfound liveliness…

Huff… Huff… Lumian gasped heavily, as if still trapped in the clutches of a never-ending nightmare.

A soft sigh escaped Madame Pualis’s lips.

“I should have noticed her strangeness sooner. Although we didn’t often cross paths, I always sensed something peculiar about her. The way she would gaze up at the night sky, speaking cryptic words about her hometown.

“Later on, I wished for her to embrace the Great Mother’s teachings, but alas, it was too late…”

Lumian’s trembling lips struggled to form the question. “When… did she… start behaving strangely?”

He had a vivid recollection of Aurore’s habit of stargazing and reminiscing about her homeland, but there had been no signs of trouble in the early years.

Granted, Lumian acknowledged that Aurore had been fixated on the cosmos more frequently over the past year, but he couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment when it all began.

Madame Pualis shook her head, suppressing her emotions, and spoke with a hint of amusement.

“That’s a question you must answer for yourself. You spend every day with her, whereas I do not. Sometimes, I envy you deeply. Yet, at other times, I believe you have your own merits. Why should we be bound by the rules of a conventional society, denying ourselves the freedom and joys of life?”

Lumian seemed lost in his own thoughts, barely registering Madame Pualis’s words. He continued to hunch over, pressing his head against the carriage floor. Muttering to himself, he questioned, “Who… who led her to embrace Inevitability?”

“Perhaps only she knows the answer. Unfortunately…” Madame Pualis sighed once more.

Lumian fell into silence, taking deep breaths to steady himself.

Once… twice… thrice… Time seemed to blur as he wrestled with his thoughts. Finally, he straightened his posture, lowered his hands, and turned his gaze towards Madame Pualis.

“Have you ever encountered an elf-like creature resembling a lizard in the village?”

“No.” Madame Pualis shook her head.

The diaphanous “lizard” from my dream was merely a symbol. Did it represent the influence of Inevitability? Or did it actually exist, concealed deep within reality? Lumian pondered incessantly, as if this were the only way to prevent the razor-sharp blades from piercing his shattered heart.

He posed a new question.

“Have you ever come across the legend of the Warlock? The one about nine bulls being the only ones capable of pulling the coffin.”

“No,” Madame Pualis replied once more, shaking her head.

Lumian continued to inquire, one question after another. Eventually, he lost track of what he was asking and whether Madame Pualis had even responded. In his mind, her face became hazy, as though she were standing dozens or hundreds of meters away.

At some undetermined point, the four-wheeled carriage came to a halt. Lumian found himself back on the roadside, moving forward without purpose or destination.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The cathedral bell tolled, signaling midnight.

Suddenly, Lumian snapped out of his daze, realizing he had returned to the Auberge du Coq Doré.

Almost instinctively, he ascended the steps and prepared to push open the door. But after a few seconds of shock, he retreated back onto the street, wandering towards the end of Rue Anarchie like a lost soul.

He walked until he reached Avenue du Marché. The sky, perpetually gloomy throughout the night, now became shrouded in thick, dark clouds. There was no crimson moon or stars to be seen.

Finally, Lumian arrived at the entrance of Salle de Bal Brise, where a cacophony of voices and the rhythmic beat of drums emanated, creating an unusually vibrant atmosphere.

Feeling overwhelmed by the environment, he abruptly spun around, staggering to the side of the road. Finding a spot in the shadow, far away from the nearest gas street lamp, he sat on the ground.

Pitter. Patter. As time ticked by, raindrops began to fall, landing on the ground, his head, and before him.

The raindrops grew stronger, creating a steady patter.

Lumian remained motionless, as if he had transformed into a statue, allowing the rain to soak his hair, face, and clothes.

Suddenly, a shadow appeared above him, and the raindrops vanished.

Confused, Lumian looked up and saw a dark-blue umbrella, its metal frame supporting the fabric, held by Jenna.

He averted his gaze, staring blankly at the middle of the road where mist had started to rise. He made no effort to stop Jenna nor acknowledged her presence.

Jenna, wearing heavy smokey makeup and a sequined, low-cut red dress, draped a lightly-colored shawl with sizable holes over her shoulders to conceal some of her skin.

She observed Lumian for a few seconds, refraining from asking any questions. Standing beside him, she held the umbrella aloft.

The heavy rain persisted for an entire hour before gradually subsiding. Only scattered droplets now dripped from the buildings on either side and the street lamps.

Lumian rose slowly, as if he had lost something.

Jenna folded her umbrella and muttered, her voice barely audible.

“The rain will cease eventually, just as darkness always gives way. The sun is destined to rise, and its light will surely illuminate the earth.”

Lumian remained silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the darkened road ahead.

“How would you feel when you discover that someone you trust isn’t who you thought they were?”

Jenna didn’t respond directly. Instead, she countered with a question of her own, “Do you still trust him?”

Lumian pursed his lips, his answer unwavering, “Yes.”

“If you still trust him, then find out why he did it,” Jenna advised, her tone calm.

Lumian’s hands trembled slightly as he took a series of deep breaths.

Eventually, his body returned to normal, and he turned to face Jenna. “Why are you here?”

Jenna’s reply carried both frustration and amusement, “Dammit! This is just outside Salle de Bal Brise! I didn’t need to go to the theater tonight, so I came here to sing and make some cash. When I stepped out, I spotted you sitting by the roadside, completely drenched.”

Lumian averted his gaze and began walking forward, his expression devoid of emotion.

He splashed through puddles, striding toward Rue des Blouses Blanches.

“Where are you going?” Jenna asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

Lumian responded without looking back, “To find out the reason!”

He recalled Aurore’s words when she pushed him away from the altar: “My grimoires…”

Considering the current circumstances, Lumian suspected that his sister was trying to convey that he could uncover clues about the source of the abnormality within her grimoires!

Jenna followed Lumian, holding the umbrella, and probed, “Do you think you can find the reason in just one night?”

“Perhaps it will take a long time,” Lumian impatiently replied.

Jenna muttered under her breath, “Then why are you in such a hurry? Rest and clear your mind. It might help you uncover the reason more quickly.”

Lumian contemplated his limited understanding of the grimoires' contents and his lack of mystical knowledge. He fell into silence.

Once again, he turned to Jenna. "Is Franca at home?"

"Why do you ask?" Jenna appeared perplexed. "She probably won't return to Rue des Blouses Blanches today. She mentioned wanting to spend a pleasant evening with Gardner Martin."

Phew… Lumian exhaled and redirected his steps toward Rue Anarchie.

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Chapter 221 - 221 Venting

221 Venting

Jenna's gaze fixated on Lumian's retreating figure as she inquired, "Where are you off to?"

"Getting some shut-eye," Lumian replied without glancing back.

Pursing her lips, Jenna pondered for a brief moment before deciding to follow him.

She wanted to ascertain his final destination and see if he truly intended to return to the Auberge du Coq Doré to sleep. Otherwise, with his current state, she couldn't fathom the trouble he might stir up.

Ignoring Jenna's presence, Lumian ambled slowly back towards the Auberge du Coq Doré.

As he reached the motel's entrance, he discovered the main door firmly locked. Rather than scaling the pipes, he retrieved a small wire from his person and deftly inserted it into the brass keyhole, skillfully manipulating it.

The door swung open, revealing the murky interior. The only source of illumination emanated from the staircase leading down to the basement bar.

Lumian cast a fleeting glance and chose to descend in that direction.

Dammit! Didn't he claim he was going to bed? Jenna cursed inwardly and let out a resigned sigh. She trailed after him into the Auberge du Coq Doré's basement bar.

The bar wasn't bustling with patrons. Two or three inebriated men occupied a small round table, sporadically bellowing, but they lacked any significant strength.

The sole customer at the bar counter happened to be Lumian's neighbor, Gabriel, the playwright residing in Room 206.

Garbed in a faded linen shirt, brown trousers, and oversized black-framed glasses, Gabriel's hair appeared unkempt and greasy.

"You're still drinking at this hour?" Lumian settled beside Gabriel, his gaze fixed upon the glass of green absinthe clasped in the playwright's hand, shimmering with a psychedelic allure.

Has he returned to normal? Jenna appraised Lumian, sensing that his condition wasn't as dire as before.

Suppressing a yawn with her hand, she pulled a barstool over and took a seat, resolute in her intent to observe for another thirty minutes.

Gabriel forced a bitter smile and responded, "I just finished a manuscript and came down for a drink."

"Are all authors the same? Do you prefer to toil at night and slumber during the day?" Lumian rapped on the bar counter, beckoning for a glass of absinthe.

Pausing for a moment, Gabriel replied, "Many authors are like that. Tranquil nights grant us greater inspiration.

"But that's not why I stay up late. I must visit various theaters during the day, persuading managers to peruse and accept my manuscript.

"Today, I went to the Théatre de la Renaissance in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. Their manager, Nathan Lopp, is renowned as the most astute theater manager. He possesses the highest likelihood of recognizing the value of my script. Yet, he refused to see me. I failed to meet him both at his office and during my visit to his apartment."

Upon hearing words like "theater" and "manager," Jenna inwardly gasped, a vague sense of trepidation creeping over her.

The fact that many individuals around her worshiped an evil god had left a lasting scar on her psyche.

Furthermore, their abilities were repulsive and twisted, evoking deep-rooted revulsion within her.

"Do you happen to know where the theater manager lives?"

"Yes, I've visited him at his apartment before, along with other playwrights. He's still unmarried and often changes mistresses," Gabriel rambled on.

A grin crept across Lumian's face.

"I have a way to get that fellow to read your script, but I can't guarantee he will accept it."

"Really?" Gabriel was taken aback and perplexed.

There's actually a way? Jenna wondered, her mind filled with bewilderment.

Lumian swiftly finished his absinthe and rose to his feet.

"Let's go at once. Bring your script!"

"…" Gabriel had never encountered such a man of action.

It was already midnight!

With no remaining hope, he resolved to give it a try. Downing the last of his absinthe, he ascended to the second floor to retrieve the script for his three-act play.

Standing at the entrance of Auberge du Coq Doré, Jenna studied Lumian with a mix of puzzlement and curiosity. "Do you truly have a solution?"

Lumian scoffed dismissively. "You need not believe me."

"Heh!" Jenna expressed her disdain.

Uncertain if this was a consequence of his troubled state, she felt a twinge of curiosity and decided to follow Lumian to prevent him from engaging in any rash actions.

Before long, Gabriel returned to the ground floor.

He had changed into a clean and respectable formal suit, complete with a crimson bow tie.

"Address," Lumian inquired calmly.

"Room 702, 15 Rue Defoe, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative." Gabriel gazed at the poorly lit Rue Anarchie, observing only a few inebriated individuals and wanderers.

He tentatively asked, "Shall we walk there?"

There were no public carriages available at this hour, and Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative was adjacent to the market district.

Lumian paid no attention to the query, instead strolling towards Avenue du Marché at a steady pace. He halted before a late-night-operating rental carriage, a four-wheeled two-seater, and addressed the driver, who sported the uniform of the Empire Carriage Company.

"To 15 Rue Defoe, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative."

The carriage driver, donning a waxed hat and a blue gown adorned with yellow buttons, scrutinized Lumian and his two companions before stating, "Two verl d'or."

In Trier, daytime travel in a rental carriage lasting less than an hour cost 1.25 verl d'or, with an additional 1.75 verl d'or per hour. After midnight until 6 a.m., short journeys were priced at 2 verl d'or, while longer trips incurred a charge of 2.5 verl d'or per hour.

Lumian remained silent, producing two silver coins worth 1 verl d'or each and tossing them to the carriage driver.

Showing no courtesy, he boarded the carriage and took a seat.

This left Gabriel in a predicament. Unsure whether he should act chivalrously and jostle with Ciel or allow the singer, Jenna, to make her own choice.

Eventually, realizing she hadn't been invited, Jenna grumbled and settled herself beside Lumian, striving to secure some personal space.

The rental carriage set off, embarking on its journey towards Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.

During the ride, Lumian maintained an unsettling silence, leaving Gabriel hesitant to inquire about his solution. The atmosphere inside the carriage grew somewhat uncomfortable.

Having grown accustomed to Lumian's peculiar state that night, Jenna cleared her mind and focused on her own thoughts.

After an indeterminate period, the rental carriage came to a halt at 15 Rue Defoe.

Lumian wasted no time and headed straight for the apartment building. Upon entering the lobby, he was intercepted by a vigilant guard.

"Which floor and room are you residing in?" the dutiful guard inquired. "If you're not a resident here, you need…"

Before the guard could finish his sentence, a chilling object was pressed against his temple.

Lumian had swiftly produced a revolver from under his armpit and pressed the barrel firmly against the guard's forehead.

"W-What do you think you're doing?" the guard, who appeared to be almost fifty, stammered.

Gabriel stood frozen, his mind filled with doubt regarding Ciel's supposed solution.

Amused and eager to witness the unfolding events, Jenna observed Lumian silently guide the guard to a secluded corner of the lobby. Using the rope and various items he had with him, he proceeded to bind the guard's hands and feet, effectively rendering him immobile. A gag was placed over the guard's mouth to ensure his silence.

With the task completed, Lumian shut the apartment door behind him and secured the lock before ascending the staircase.

As if awakening from a dream, Gabriel hastened after him, his voice filled with anxiety.

“Is that really okay?”

“What do you think?” Lumian replied with a grin.

Gabriel faltered, lost for words. He hesitated, contemplating whether he should abandon his pursuit of having Nathan Lopp, the manager of Théatre de la Renaissance, read his script.

If I were to express my doubts and return now, would Ciel become furious and resort to violence? After all, he is a mob leader… Gabriel gaped, incapable of uttering anything that might dissuade Lumian.

Soon, the trio reached the top floor and stopped outside Room 702.

Gabriel, poised to knock, witnessed Lumian deftly employ the short wire to open the vermilion wooden door.

“…” Gabriel couldn’t make sense of Lumian’s intentions in the slightest.

Observing this, Jenna swiftly removed her light-colored shawl and draped it over her face, exposing only her forehead and eyes.

She harbored suspicions that Ciel was about to cause trouble. To avoid being implicated by him, it was prudent to conceal her identity. At the very least, she couldn’t allow anyone to remember her appearance.

Lumian stepped into the living room, awash with the glow of the crimson moonlight. Producing a bandage, he wrapped it around his face, leaving only his eyes and nostrils visible.

“… ” Though Gabriel failed to comprehend why Jenna and Ciel were veiling their faces, he instinctively found a cloth and covered the lower portion of his own face.

Enveloped in a white bandage, Lumian surveyed the surroundings before proceeding towards the master bedroom. He turned the handle and gently pushed open the door.

The living room was bathed in the luminosity of the crimson moon, illuminating the figures reclining in the bed.

There lay a man and a woman. The man boasted disheveled black hair, appearing to be in his early forties. His countenance was gaunt, with a prominent nose bridge. The woman possessed curly blond hair, seemingly in her twenties. Her complexion was flawless, and her features were strikingly beautiful.

Beneath the velvet blanket, they appeared to be unclothed.

“He’s the theater manager?” Lumian didn’t restrain his voice at all.

Gabriel felt as though he were trapped in a surreal reverie.

“Yes, that’s him.”

Lumian advanced swiftly towards the grand bed. The manager of Théatre de la Renaissance, Nathan Lopp, stirred from his slumber upon hearing the commotion.

Before he could open his eyes, Lumian grasped his shoulder and hoisted him upright.

Nathan Lopp jolted awake, his eyes confronted with the sight of a head swathed in white bandages.

His heart seemed to skip a beat, rendering him speechless and devoid of protest.

In the next instant, a revolver was pressed against his temple.

Nathan Lopp sealed his lips shut and was propelled into the living room.

As he passed by Jenna, Lumian cast a sidelong glance towards the bed and whispered, “Keep an eye on that woman.”

Jenna found herself bewildered by the unfolding events, yet it did nothing to quell her exhilaration.

Without hesitation, she lowered herself into a crouch, drew her own revolver, and trained it upon the recently awakened blonde. With a touch of cold detachment, she issued a stern warning, “I don’t want to hear a word.”

The blonde wrapped her arms tightly around the blanket, trembling on the bed.

Lumian settled Nathan Lopp into a recliner, securing his hands and feet to the sofa and floor using garments.

Perplexed, Gabriel came over. Suddenly, a thought struck him: Are we here to rob Nathan Lopp, or are we here to present him with my script?

Jenna escorted the blonde, clad in a nightgown, to the living room. Lumian, who had illuminated the crystal chandelier, took a few steps back. He retrieved his revolver and seated himself on the divan opposite the recliner.

Nathan Lopp appeared freshly awakened and uttered anxiously, “How much do you want? I’ll give it to you, everything! There’s a total of 1,100 verl d’or and a diamond necklace here. I’ll surrender them all! Just promise not to harm me!”

Lumian, his face concealed by bandages, turned towards Gabriel and stated, “Read it.”

“Read what?” Gabriel responded, his mind blank.

Lumian let out a soft chuckle.

“Read your script. Monsieur Nathan Lopp is waiting.”

Wh… Gabriel stood dumbfounded.

Is this the solution to making Nathan Lopp read my script?

Is this how a rational person thinks?

Not only Gabriel pondered this, but Jenna couldn’t help but mumble to herself.

Ciel’s mind is truly unhinged!

Won’t this result in Monsieur Playwright being taken to the police station?

Thank goodness I’ve concealed my face!

With a similar sense of relief, Gabriel approached Nathan Lopp apprehensively. He retrieved the script and began reading it aloud, as if compelled to do so.

Nathan Lopp listened in bewilderment, questioning whether he was trapped in a ludicrous dream.

Halfway through his slumber, a masked intruder invaded his abode, binding him to a chair merely to subject him to a script recital?

As he listened attentively, Nathan Lopp’s professional instincts kicked in, drawing him further into the script.

After the main dialogue of the first scene concluded, Nathan Lopp interrupted Gabriel.

“Who wrote this?”

“Me,” Gabriel replied subconsciously.

Nathan Lopp’s voice resonated deeply as he stated, “Bring it to my office tomorrow at 10 a.m. We’ll sign the contract.”

“Alright, alright.” Gabriel’s emotions swirled with surprise, happiness, and fear.

Will I find the police waiting for me at Théatre de la Renaissance tomorrow?

Lumian chuckled, rising from his seat and making his way to the door with his revolver.

Jenna and Gabriel followed closely behind, allowing the blonde woman to free Nathan Lopp from his restraints.

As they descended the stairs, Jenna flashed a smile at Gabriel and inquired, “Monsieur Playwright, your script is exceptional. Your words are captivating. What is its title?”

“It’s called ‘Lightseeker,’” Gabriel responded instinctively, unable to comprehend why an underground singer held such interest in the script.

Jenna quickened her pace to catch up with Lumian. Lowering her voice, she asked, “Is this your solution? Aren’t you concerned that the theater manager may also be a devotee of an evil god?”

In her current state of mind, all theaters seemed suspect.

Lumian removed the bandages, his expression unwavering, as he replied, “Then we would have fought.”

I knew it… Jenna silently muttered to herself.

After retrieving their belongings and ropes from the guard, the trio boarded a rental carriage and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

Once Gabriel expressed his gratitude and retreated to his room, a mix of worry and joy, Jenna observed Ciel as he freshened up and settled onto the bed. Finally, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She drew the curtains and carefully closed the wooden door before departing Auberge du Coq Doré.

In the nearly pitch-black darkness, Lumian’s eyes remained closed, unmoving.

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Chapter 222 - 222 Fliers

222 Fliers

Clang! Clang! Clang!

At the stroke of six, Lumian sat upright and flung open the curtains, allowing a gentle light to stream into the room, breathing life into the once silent space. He rubbed his face, freshened up, and attended to his needs.

Once ready, he changed his clothes and departed from Auberge du Coq Doré. Making his way around Rue des Blouses Blanches, he entered the rented safe house.

With great anticipation, Lumian delved into Aurore's grimoires, hoping to uncover some hidden gems that had eluded him in his previous search.

Aurore's grimoires contained three distinct categories of knowledge.

Firstly, there were the common mystical understandings—the names of various pathways, the state of certain Sequences, the foundations of ritualistic magic, the significance of symbolic elements, and the pronunciation and meanings of several supernatural languages.

The second category focused on the practical application of mystical knowledge and personal abilities. It demanded deep contemplation, as it contained numerous recorded or purchased spells, as well as defenses against curses.

Lastly, there were fragments of peculiar and incomplete knowledge, along with intriguing anecdotes. Some were bestowed upon Aurore by the Hidden Sage, while others emerged from interactions within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

These miscellaneous tidbits weren't organized into separate grimoires but appeared sporadically as Aurore acquired them.

For Lumian, the second category posed the greatest challenge. Warlock spells like Illumination, Weed Removal, Exorcism, Soul Summoning, Lightning, Wind Creation, and Force Field Hand proved to be perplexing. After all, he lacked the fundamental understanding of mysticism and the support of Beyonder powers required to cast spells.

On the other hand, Lumian had made significant progress in comprehending, learning, and mastering ritualistic magic since becoming an Alms Monk.

Lumian also noticed that his sister had omitted certain basic rules, such as the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation, from her grimoires.

However, this was to be expected. Such laws were scarce and easily remembered. They were ingrained in the mind and required no additional recording.

After an extensive morning of reading, Lumian found no signs of suspicion. Instead, he accumulated a myriad of questions that demanded consultation with others.

He let out a slow exhale, carefully folded the pages containing his inquiries, and tucked them into his pocket before departing the safe house.

On his way to Avenue du Marché, Lumian's attention was caught by several voting booths. Uniformed police officers and heavily armed military police were working diligently to maintain order, allowing long queues of people to deposit their votes into wooden boxes.

Despite having acquired a new identification from Gardner Martin and assuming the persona of Ciel Dubois, a resident of the market district for nearly two years with the right to vote, Lumian chose not to register at all. He had no desire to partake in the parliamentary election.

After some time, a newsboy rushed by and tossed a stack of white papers into the air.

Lumian observed as many pedestrians eagerly collected the floating papers and began reading them with great seriousness. He bent down and retrieved a copy lying at his feet.

The white paper featured several lines of text in the Intis script, printed in a simple and easily comprehensible syntax.

"Hugues Artois is a traitor!

"In the war against the Loen Kingdom several years ago, he deserted his troops and fled. Countless fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons never returned!

"He is participating in the parliamentary election with clandestine support from the Loen Kingdom!"

He vividly remembered Hugo Artois's campaign posters emphasizing his military service. He had only retired from the army upon reaching the rank of major and ventured into politics, starting as an assistant secretary at the National Convention.

Could this be a desperate move from a candidate facing unsatisfactory early poll results? As Lumian pondered over the situation, a group of men, suspected to be mobsters, approached and forcibly confiscated the fliers from the pedestrians, resorting to physical violence and vulgar insults. Curiously, the nearby police officers seemed oblivious to the scene unfolding before them.

Lumian raised his gaze and recognized one of the men.

They were members of the Poison Spur Mob, the very individuals who had previously followed Margot and Wilson to Auberge du Coq Doré.

“You dare read something like that, you wretch?”

“You leper, hand me the thing in your hand!”

“Son of a bitch, do you want me to rough you up?”

The Poison Spur Mob members closed in on Lumian. Just as they were about to snatch the flier from his hand, their eyes fell upon his short blond hair with dark roots.

A mischievous grin crept across Lumian’s face.

Ciel! The Poison Spur Mob members instinctively turned around, their intent to flee evident.

Lumian swiftly lifted his foot and delivered a forceful kick to one of the mobsters’ rear, causing him to lose his balance and tumble to the ground.

“What’s the matter? Can’t recognize your pépé?” Lumian taunted, watching the disoriented Poison Spur Mob members scramble away in a disheveled state. He had no inclination to pursue them any further.

Lumian tossed aside the flier he held and strolled back to Salle de Bal Brise.

Immediately upon entering, Louis approached with Sarkota by his side.

“Boss, Charlie quit his job as a waiter last night and only asked for a week’s worth of salary.”

“I’m aware,” Lumian responded calmly.

Louis recalled how the boss had taken Charlie away the previous night, returning without him. Shortly afterward, Charlie tendered his resignation and left. This sequence of events left Louis with a lingering suspicion that something secretive was at play, but he didn’t dare inquire further.

Lumian cast a brief glance at Louis and casually inquired as he made his way towards the café on the second floor, “How old are you?”

“27,” Louis answered, puzzled as to why the boss seemed interested in this particular detail.

Without much hesitation, Lumian continued, “Are you married? Do you have any children?”

“Not yet,” Louis replied with an awkward smile. “I plan to get married when I’m more mature.

Though he had managed to escape the life of a low-ranking mobster and now served as the leader’s bodyguard, eliminating the constant fear of being beaten to death on the streets, Louis recognized the inherent dangers that still lurked.

He didn’t wish to benefit another man shortly after entering married life and having a child.

Lumian nodded.

“It’s important to consider your future. The other Louis I know already has several children.”

Louis brushed off the remark, perceiving it as an attempt by the boss to force a conversation when there was little else to discuss, as if trying to prove a point.

…

Franca skipped her lunch with Gardner Martin and returned to 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches before noon.

Upon reaching the house, she noticed that the door to the guest bedroom was tightly shut. Perplexed, she turned the handle and pushed it open.

Inside, Jenna lay fast asleep in her pajamas, huddled under a blanket.

Stirred by the door’s movement, she rubbed her eyes and slowly sat up, her gaze fixed on Franca.

“Still snoozing?” Franca asked, her smile in place.

Just because you don’t have acting lessons at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, you’re letting yourself go like this?

Jenna combed through her tawny locks and grumbled, “It’s all Ciel’s fault; things went on late into the night.”

“…” Franca’s smile froze.

Jenna continued, “I don’t know what happened to him last night, but his mood and condition were off. I was worried something might happen, so I followed him. Only after he entered Auberge du Coq Doré and got into bed did I return to get some rest.”

Franca breathed a sigh of relief and inquired with concern, “Tell me everything.”

Jenna recounted the events starting from her performance at Salle de Bal Brise, seeing Lumian sitting by the road in the rain, all the way until he employed an

unimaginable “method” to secure Gabriel’s script deal. Finally, she said,

“Dammit, it was almost three o’clock before he finally agreed to go back to his room and sleep. I was beyond exhausted!”

Franca listened attentively and expressed her worry, “It’s rare to see him in such a state…”

Franca paused, a realization dawning on her.

Lumian was still undergoing regular treatment from a psychiatrist, and perhaps this state she witnessed was his truest form.

“He must have experienced some sort of trauma last night. I’ll ask him about it later.” After Franca referred to him as a relative, she no longer concealed her close relationship with Lumian in front of Jenna.

Jenna nodded.

“Choose your words carefully. Don’t agitate him.”

…

On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, in Lumian’s office, he noticed Franca, who had turned invisible.

“I heard from Jenna that something happened to you last night,” Franca, dressed in a white blouse and black pants, asked casually. “Did you meet Madame Pualis?”

During her lunch with Jenna, she had managed to piece together what had triggered Lumian’s mental distress.

Lumian seemed to lose all his strength upon hearing Franca’s question and slumped into the swiveling armchair.

After a pause of more than ten seconds, he exhaled and said, “That’s right. I can’t accept the truth I learned, but I have no choice.”

Sensing his reluctance to share further, Franca didn’t press the matter. She nodded slightly and offered, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Lumian straightened up and spoke bluntly, “Two things. First, I have numerous questions about mysticism. Second, the issue with the Poison Spur Mob.

“As I mentioned before, once the election is over, Hugues Artois will become a member of parliament. ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger and his cohorts will gain a new boon. In due time, we’ll all be in danger. Should we launch a raid on 126 Avenue du Marché at night to eliminate any hidden threats before the election results are announced?”

Franca pondered for a moment and replied, “Based on your description, the Heretic Spellmaster holds a significant advantage on their home turf. Even if the two of us use our trump cards, our chances of successfully eliminating ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger and the others are uncertain, assuming there are no other surprises awaiting us.

“But if we don’t act now, they will become even more formidable after receiving their new boons…”

She hesitated, unsure of the best course of action.

…

At 126 Avenue du Marché, within the three-story building with a garden.

“Black Scorpion” Roger gazed at his subordinate who had infiltrated the market district’s parliamentary election commission and asked eagerly, “What’s the situation?”

The subordinate replied with excitement, “Monsieur Hugues Artois is leading by a wide margin!”

A smile crept across “Black Scorpion” Roger’s face. Once the subordinate left, he turned to “Baldy” Harman and “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina, saying,

“The election results will be announced tomorrow afternoon. Lady Moon will personally oversee the ritual and grant us a boon during the night.

“Afterward, we won’t hold back anymore. That wretched Ciel must meet his demise!”

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Chapter 223 - 223 Choice

223 Choice

On a southeastern hill overlooking Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, there stood an active quarry.

Having departed from Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian embarked on a quest to find a suitable candidate, which led him to this very place.

The night was deep, and the lamplighters diligently illuminated the gas lamps strewn across the streets. In stark contrast, the quarry, having concluded its daily operations, was enveloped in darkness, devoid of any artificial illumination.

Scattered across the quarry floor were several gypsum furnaces, surrounded by numerous tramps.

Lumian honed his focus, meticulously assessing each individual's circumstances.

At long last, he discovered a target that fit his requirements.

Resting against one of the gypsum furnaces was a male tramp. His shirt, pants, and jacket were tattered, their original hue obscured by the dark brown soil. Sunken cheeks and emaciated limbs almost distorted his figure. His unkempt hair and beard intertwined in a mess of strands.

His eyes were half-shut, and his shallow breaths suggested he might perish at any moment.

According to Lumian's observations, the tramp was indeed approaching the end of his waning life. He had but two or three days left.

Approaching the figure, Lumian squatted down and retrieved the gas canister he had obtained from the unsavory Hedsey, whom Franca had aptly named Mysticism Smelling Salts. Unscrewing the lid, he positioned it near the tramp's nostrils.

He and Franca had already distributed Rentas's "remains." The sedatives and coins totaling 212 verl d'or belonged to Lumian, while the remainder was Franca's share.

Achoo!

The tramp sneezed twice, and his eyes fluttered open.

Weakly gazing at Lumian, donned in a blue laborer's uniform and a dark cap, he inquired, puzzled, "W-who are you? W-what are you trying to do?"

Lumian responded calmly, "I'm just a passing worker. I sensed that your demise was imminent, so I approached to verify."

The tramp found no fault in Lumian's explanation. In the Intis Republic, upon discovering a lifeless body, whether reporting to the governmental authorities or the two Churches, individuals would receive compensation for promptly ensuring purification or cremation.

Though the sum was meager, a mere 1 verl d'or, even the lower-class citizens found it a pleasant surprise, no matter how modest the additional benefits.

The tramp's beard trembled as he managed a smile.

"You guessed right. I also feel as if my time is drawing near. Drop by more frequently over the next two days, so your money doesn't get snatched away."

Perhaps it was the effect of the Mysticism Smelling Salts, or perhaps the topic of death momentarily stirred the tramp's spirits, for his words ceased to falter, and his reasoning became clearer.

"Have you got any family left?" Lumian inquired casually, squatting before the tramp as he stowed away the Mysticism Smelling Salts.

The tramp fell silent for a few moments, then slowly shook his head.

"No, not any more.

"Has your family passed on?" Lumian probed further.

The tramp's beard swayed with the motion of his muscles, and his voice carried an unmistakable tinge of anguish.

"They're gone. All gone. My parents didn't make it past 45. My brother fell in the war a few years back. My sisters succumbed to illness, and her child became a child laborer. By the age of ten, he was already hunchbacked and died from sheer exhaustion in a textile mill…"

The tramp seemed to stray from Lumian's question, more akin to a recollection before his impending demise. He rambled on, "I used to toil in the quarry, praised for my strength. Then, a Monsieur saw my diligence, believed I could endure hardship. He taught me to place detonators and loosen rocks. My pay rose, and life took a turn for the better. I had a wife, tough as nails just like me, and three precious children, but only one survived. My little angel, my daughter.

"When the food prices sparked protests, my body suddenly gave way, and I fell grievously ill.

“My wife and daughter spent everything, amassed debts. Eventually, they nursed me back to health, but I lost my job in the process. We were hounded by loan sharks day in and day out. Those men took away my little angel. My wife and I searched desperately. A few weeks later, we found her lifeless body. She couldn’t endure their torment and chose to end it all.

“My wife wanted to turn to the police, but they beat her to death and dumped her somewhere. I was battered and left unconscious, but I survived. I’ve made it till today…”

Lumian listened in silence, his voice deep when he finally spoke, “Any wishes?”

The tramp laughed out loud.

“Wishes? My greatest wish is to pass away shortly after catching that illness.”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before continuing, “No thirst for revenge?”

The tramp’s eyes glazed over as he replied, “Those loan sharks were killed by other mobs. New loan sharks have taken their place.”

He recollected Lumian’s initial question and spoke in a voice that seemed to drift from another realm, “When my time comes, I think—I think I’d like to have another meatloaf. I remember those years, every weekend, my wife would buy the meat herself, add flax seeds and vinegar, turn it into a sauce, and stuff it between flatbread. My daughter adored it, and I loved it too…”

Lumian nodded, rising to his feet and making his way down the hill, toward the streets below.

After approximately 45 minutes, he returned to the gypsum furnace, carrying a Rouen meatloaf that filled the air with its enticing aroma.

The tramp seemed on the verge of fainting once more. Lumian employed the Mysticism Smelling Salts once again to rouse him from his stupor.

The tramp sneezed a few times, his gaze fixed blankly on the Rouen meatloaf. He quickly took bites, his beard becoming coated with a thin layer of oil.

Having consumed half of it, he gasped for breath and inquired with a smile, “What’s your game, lad?”

“I’ll be stabbing you later. It might just bring about your demise tonight,” Lumian stated plainly.

The tramp chuckled weakly and queried, “Aren’t you afraid of the police? I fear not death. I should’ve perished long ago. Did you know that every winter, I sleep inside this gypsum furnace? Even after a day’s work, it retains a soothing warmth that lasts until nearly daybreak. However, the lingering fumes within are poisonous and could claim me in my sweet slumber. So far, it hasn’t happened to

me.”

Lumian chuckled.

“I reckon the police aren’t too bothered about how a tramp meets his end, so long as it’s not a blatant murder.”

Without further ado, the tramp devoured the remaining Rouen meatloaf and let out a belch.

After a pause of over ten seconds, he adjusted his position and spoke, “You may proceed.”

Lumian drew his blade, Fallen Mercury, adorned with sinister patterns, and thrust it into the tramp’s hand.

Blood trickled forth, staining the tip of the blade crimson.

Simultaneously, Lumian once again beheld the illusory river of mercury.

His purpose in seeking a near-death tramp was to exchange for a more practical fate!

This was not to say that encountering the fate of the Montsouris ghost wasn’t formidable. Quite the contrary, it could lead to certain death or even the demise of an entire family for many humans. Furthermore, it clung tenaciously. However, the issue lay in the time it took to take effect. The exchange of fates could often be completed within minutes, whereas the Montsouris ghost’s assault on its target occurred at random intervals. It might strike in ten to twenty minutes, or it might wait for three to four months.

In other words, the fate of “encountering the Montsouris ghost” was ill-suited for a surprise attack or a battle.

Furthermore, having learned from the experience and lessons of Margot’s death, Lumian’s target, “Black Scorpion” Roger, would undoubtedly be wary of such matters. If stabbed by Fallen Mercury and not instantly dispatched, there was a high likelihood that he would seek aid from Madame Moon. Lumian was uncertain if the lady possessing true godhood could fend off the Montsouris ghost. If she could, his operation would be an utter failure.

Considering these factors, he intended to preemptively alter the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost and choose a destiny more conducive to surprise attacks and assassinations. He desired “Black Scorpion” Roger to perish on the spot, without a chance to seek any assistance.

As these thoughts raced through Lumian’s mind, a series of images “appeared” before him.

He saw the tramp, asleep inside the gypsum furnace, the tramp who had been viciously beaten and left unconscious, the tramp who had recently fainted, the

tramp who had crumbled in front of his daughter's lifeless body, the tramp who had shared homemade meatloaf with his wife and daughter, the tramp who meticulously prepared and set up explosives…

Lumian knew he couldn't choose the tramp's destined fate of perishing in two or three days. It was an overwhelming burden, beyond what Fallen Mercury could bear. Even the Luck Transference Spell couldn't transfer such a dire fate.

The only solution Lumian could think of was to employ the Substitution Spell and find a death row inmate to take the tramp's place. He would assume the inmate's identity for a period of time, gaining the acceptance of those around him. Then, he would perform the ritual and swap the tramp's impending death with that of the inmate. However, this process would take two to three weeks, if not longer, to prepare. Time was not on his side.

Drawing on his vast experience, Lumian made a quick decision and chose the fate of the tramp who had recently collapsed due to his failing body.

It departed from the mercury river and condensed into a droplet that seeped into the blade of Fallen Mercury. Simultaneously, the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost shifted entirely to the tramp.

Lumian retracted the wicked, pewter-black dagger. It remained clean and free from bloodstains, and the wound on the tramp's hand was shallow, as though it would soon leave a scar.

"That's it?" the tramp asked in puzzlement.

He had been prepared to meet his end then and there.

"Yes." Lumian stood up and departed from the hill.

Late that night, inside the gypsum furnace, the tramp convulsed suddenly and succumbed to suffocation.

…

Across from 126 Avenue du Marché.

Returning here, Lumian nestled in a shadowy corner, shielded from the glow of the gas street lamps. His eyes fixated on the target building.

Beside him, Franca emerged from the darkness, dressed in a black robe and hood.

"How did it go?" Lumian asked, entirely unsurprised.

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Chapter 224 - 224 Disguise

224 Disguise

Franca cast her gaze upon 126 Avenue du Marché and remarked, “Whether it’s ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger, ‘Baldy’ Harman, or ‘Short-legged Candlestick’ Castina, none of them have shown themselves.”

“Extremely cautious,” Lumian objectively commented.

Franca let out a scoff.

“If I were in their shoes, I’d be cautious too. If I manage to make it through tonight, I can turn the tables and emerge victorious. How foolish would it be for me to reveal myself? Even if someone were to abduct Gardner and maim him at the doorstep, I wouldn’t budge.”

This example isn’t convincing… Lumian asked, “What if it’s Jenna who’s bound instead of Gardner?”

“…” Franca fell silent.

Noticing the Provoker potion taking effect, Lumian, nearing the completion of his digestion, chose not to press further. Instead, he inquired, “What else have you observed?”

Neither Lumian nor Franca had devised a specific plan for the assault on “Black Scorpion” Roger and the others. They possessed only a handful of vague ideas and were currently engaged in preliminary investigations and preparations.

Franca pondered for a few seconds before revealing, “A member of the Poison Spur Mob frequents the election commission and this vicinity. It’s as if he’s providing ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger with real-time updates on the polls.”

Pausing briefly, a mischievous smile curled the corners of her mouth.

“We can exploit this!”

Simultaneously, Lumian mirrored her grin.

“Isn’t it like stumbling upon a soft pillow just when you’re sleepy? Indeed, delving into politics is a treacherous affair.”

Franca turned her head, amusement twinkling in her eyes as she glanced at Lumian.

“Your sister must have imparted many hometown sayings to you. How do you plan on operating this thing?”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before speaking again.

“If I were an Actor, the problem would be simple. Nonetheless, I still possess those glasses.”

Franca nodded, satisfied with his response.

“This operation requires both a surprise attack and an assassination. The importance of the assassination must outweigh that of the surprise attack to minimize a Heretic Spellmaster’s advantage on their home turf.”

After some deliberation, the two of them moved away from 126 Avenue du Marché, positioning themselves in a shadowy spot near the district’s parliamentary election commission.

The day’s voting had concluded, and the election commission staff toiled diligently, counting the votes and providing real-time updates. Countless reporters from various newspapers gathered there, eager to acquire firsthand data.

If all went according to plan, Hugues Artois would secure more than half of the registered votes tonight, enabling him to declare his election victory.

As time ticked by, the night grew darker. Suddenly, Franca nudged Lumian and pointed towards a figure exiting the election commission.

The person appeared to be almost thirty, boasting black hair, brown eyes, and a narrow face. He sported a blue-and-white striped shirt, a light brown jacket, and a thick gold necklace.

Lumian offered a subtle nod and departed from his hiding place, adopting an air of urgency as he approached the man.

He pulled his dark cap down low, obscuring his distinct blond-and-black hair.

Upon noticing someone drawing nearer, the Poison Spur Mob member cautiously altered his path.

At that moment, Lumian took a diagonal stride forward, positioning himself in front of the individual. He smiled and greeted, “Long time no see. How have you been faring within the Poison Spur Mob?”

The man was caught off guard. Utilizing the illumination from the gas street lamps, he scrutinized Lumian’s face.

Seizing the opportunity, Lumian lunged forward, gripping the other person’s neck and pulling them into an embrace.

Simultaneously, Lumian pushed the metal canister closer to the target's nose with his left hand.

He had already unscrewed the lid, but he kept his finger pressed against the opening, controlling the gas release.

The Poison Spur Mob member struggled desperately, but Lumian's palm covered his mouth and nose, silencing any outcry. His punches and kicks were easily deflected—either his neck was constricted or his back was pinned down by an elbow. His head remained ensconced in the other person's grasp, nestled against their chest. In his anxious state, it was difficult for him to strike his foe's vulnerable points, and Lumian endured the onslaught.

After a few seconds, the man's resistance began to wane. Passersby cast fleeting glances at him before walking away without detecting anything amiss.

Within moments, the man in Lumian's arms lost consciousness.

Supporting his "intoxicated" companion, Lumian sealed the bottle once more with his finger.

They arrived at a deserted alley barricaded from public access, where Lumian abandoned his target and screwed the metal canister shut.

"You're very reckless." Franca emerged from the shadows beside him. "Only in Trier can you get away with this. Anywhere else, someone would have raised a loud alarm."

"I reserve these actions solely for Trier," Lumian replied, crouching down to strip the Poison Spur Mob member of his attire and necklace. He bound his hands and feet with a rope he had brought along.

Having completed the task, Lumian administered some truth serum to his captive before reviving him with the Mysticism Smelling Salts.

Three consecutive sneezes followed. The Poison Spur Mob member opened his eyes and exclaimed in horror, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Lumian removed his cap and crouched in front of the target, wearing a smile. He asked, "Can't you recognize me?"

Under the crimson moonlight, the Poison Spur Mob member glimpsed the golden-black hair and a vaguely familiar face.

His teeth chattered.

"C-Ciel!"

"I have something to ask you. If you refuse to answer or choose to deceive me, you know the consequences," Lumian said with a smile.

His cold, merciless, and unhinged reputation preceded him within the Poison Spur Mob. The man was so terrified that his heart seemed ready to leap out of his throat.

“I’ll talk, I’ll talk!”

Unfazed, Lumian inquired, “Where were you planning to go just now?”

“To the Boss’s place to report the election’s polling situation. Monsieur Hugues Artois has secured nearly half the votes. He’s just a little shy…” Not only did the man answer Lumian’s question, but he also provided additional information.

Lumian nodded contentedly and proceeded to inquire about the specific details the Poison Spur Mob member had previously relayed to “Black Scorpion” Roger.

This encompassed his demeanor towards the staff, his manner of addressing “Black Scorpion” Roger, his positioning, and his tone.

Having meticulously memorized the details, Lumian employed the sedative once more to render the Poison Spur Mob member unconscious.

Without delay, he changed into the other person’s attire, retrieved his Mystery Prying Glasses, and perched them upon his nose.

This time, underground, he beheld rats, insects, and serpents, but a charred building and a blurred face behind a glass window also materialized.

The face possessed unusually vacant eyes.

Lumian’s mind momentarily spun into disarray. Frowning, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and retrieved a collection of cosmetics.

Assisted by the crimson moonlight and the small torch held by Franca, he meticulously applied various substances to his face, utilizing the makeup mirror his companion carried.

Around ten minutes later, his countenance grew gaunter and began to assume the likeness of the Poison Spur Mob member.

His skill in makeup fell short of fully replicating the other person’s appearance, but the inherent effect of the Mystery Prying Glasses would convince anyone who glimpsed his face that he was the individual named Alsai.

Smack!

Lumian snapped the makeup mirror shut, daring not to gaze upon his reflection once more.

As Franca stowed away her belongings, she had Lumian turn his back to her.

She feared that she, too, might mistake her companion for a member of the Poison Spur Mob, thereby hindering their subsequent collaboration.

Franca examined Lumian's hair color and retrieved the disguise props she had acquired from Rentas.

"Hair and eye color are the most noticeable flaws. First, use this black hair dye, then wear these brown contact lenses.

"Damn it, anything is possible in the realm of mysticism. Who would have thought that in this day and age, Actors could create the illusion of cosmetic contacts? Although the materials are different and they don't improve vision, they can indeed alter the color of one's irises. Otherwise, Rentas wouldn't have been able to pass as Ive or you. It defies scientific explanation, but it's utterly mystical!"

Lumian paid no mind to Franca's musings and took the mysticism hair dye, which could be washed away with a special lotion. Under her guidance, he transformed his golden and black hair into a solid black hue.

Once he donned the brown contact lenses, Franca seized the opportunity to discuss the specifics of their forthcoming assault.

The two of them swiftly outlined a rough plan, but they refrained from delving into every detail. Firstly, time was limited, and secondly, they had to anticipate numerous unforeseen circumstances at the scene. It was impossible to account for every possibility, so they could only adapt and make decisions based on the main concept.

Franca produced a coin pouch.

It was a fist-sized bag made of grayish-white cloth, filled with gold, silver, and copper coins.

Franca rummaged in her bag and retrieved an iron-colored ring with a thick band and slender spikes on its surface.

"This is one of my mystical items, the Ring of Punishment," she explained to Lumian. "It serves a single purpose. It can pierce a target's Spirit Body within a five-meter range, causing excruciating pain and rendering them temporarily unconscious. For Low- and Mid-Sequence Beyonders, there are very few Beyonder powers capable of bypassing defense and directly attacking a Spirit Body. This is one of them."

Franca paused momentarily before continuing, "Wearing it for an extended period will make you irritable, bloodthirsty, cruel, and impulsive. If you use it more than three times in an hour, it will cause your personality to undergo mutation. If you remove it, you will suffer indiscriminate Psychic Piercing damage once you enter a five-meter radius. To seal it, you need to place it amidst a pile of valuable metal coins."

Currently, Franca wore the ring, ensuring neither she nor Lumian fell victim to its effects.

She handed the Ring of Punishment to Lumian.

As soon as Lumian slipped the ring onto his right middle finger, he experienced overwhelming frustration.

Collecting himself, he donned black gloves, left the alley, and jogged towards 126 Avenue du Marché.

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Chapter 225 - 225 Exposed

225 Exposed

On 126 Avenue du Marché in Lumian, concealed as Alsai, a member of the Poison Spur Mob, pressed the doorbell of the three-story building with a garden out back.

Amidst the pleasant chimes, the valet, who had previously ushered Louis Lund inside, swung open the wooden door.

Seeing Alsai's face beaming with joy, he returned the smile.

"Have the voting results for today been announced?"

"You bet!" Lumian concealed his voice with feigned delight. "Monsieur Hugues Artois will be the new member of parliament by noon tomorrow!"

The valet had long been a believer in the Great Mother, and he had been promised a reward of becoming a Villain after the election. Hearing this news delighted him, and he led Lumian straight to the living room.

In the living room, "Black Scorpion" Roger, now wearing aqua-blue silk pajamas, lounged on a divan. He addressed "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, nestled beside him while he playfully squeezed her buttocks, and "Baldy" Harman, who paced around the room.

"Hold on tight. It all comes to an end tomorrow night.

"No matter what happens in the next 24 hours, we can't leave this place!"

Is that so? Are you willing to stay here even if there's a fire, explosion, or earthquake? Lumian criticized silently. He shook off the valet and swiftly approached.

"Boss, I have good news!"

"Black Scorpion" Roger's excitement was palpable. He forgot to scrutinize his subordinates' movements, voices, and appearance. His eyes sparkled as he inquired, "Has Monsieur Hugues Artois won the election?"

"Baldy" Harman and "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina turned their gaze toward Lumian as well.

At that moment, Lumian had closed the gap between him and "Black Scorpion" Roger, standing just three meters away from the divan and the glass coffee table

before it.

He exclaimed with excitement, “He’s only 2,000 votes away from securing a majority!”

“Black Scorpion” Roger felt a tinge of disappointment, but his happiness prevailed.

He nodded and proclaimed, “Very good…”

Before he could even complete his sentence, Lumian’s hand caught his attention.

He was wearing a pair of black gloves.

Alsai didn’t have such a habit!

At that moment, two blinding beams shot out from Lumian’s eyes—like silent bullets and swift lightning bolts.

With a snap, “Black Scorpion” Roger felt the imaginary sound of his Spirit Body shattering, sending waves of excruciating pain through him. He cried out tragically, clutching his head in agony.

In his state of distress, he completely forgot to activate the protective enchantment that usually shrouded the master bedroom and living room.

The sudden twist of events, their origin unknown, left “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina and “Baldy” Harman bewildered, struggling to comprehend the situation. Their responses were purely instinctive.

One of them stood tall, assuming a defensive stance against the suspicious Alsai, while the other sprinted towards their boss, shielding his flank.

Lumian seized this golden opportunity. Drawing his weapon, Fallen Mercury, he lunged at “Black Scorpion” Roger, who huddled on the couch.

Witnessing the attack, “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina intercepted with her right elbow, disregarding the harm that would befall her. Her intention was to aid “Black Scorpion” Roger in fending off the strike.

In her other hand, she grabbed the nearby axe, attempting to swing it at Alsai.

Suddenly, a figure dressed in black robes, their face concealed beneath a hood, materialized behind her.

Franca!

Franca had skillfully employed Invisibility to trail Lumian all the way to this location. Her primary target was “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina, the one providing protection to “Black Scorpion” Roger.

She refrained from directly assassinating “Black Scorpion” Roger, fearing that a fatal blow jeopardizing his life would activate the “magic circle” with its substitution effect.

The hidden blade, wreathed in black flames, darted forth alongside Franca’s full-force strike. It pierced through Castina’s back, finding its mark in her heart.

Castina’s brown eyes widened, her face contorted with disbelief, pain, and despair.

Despite the injury, she continued to block for “Black Scorpion” Roger, but her strength had already abandoned her.

Lumian’s arm seemed to possess no bones. With fluid motion, he flicked his joints and swung his forearm, evading Castina’s feeble attempt to obstruct him. The pewter-black dirk soared, aiming straight for the leader of the Poison Spur Mob.

Fallen Mercury’s tip pierced through the aqua-blue pajamas, puncturing the skin over “Black Scorpion” Roger’s ribs.

Crimson blood rapidly welled up, and amidst the pain of the Psychic Piercing somewhat subsiding, “Black Scorpion” Roger snapped back to reality.

He emitted an unnaturally enraged shriek, and blurry faces, some bluish-white, materialized on the living room’s floor, ceiling, and walls. Most were ordinary people, a handful being children, their visages twisted with agony.

As the Undying Lands materialized, “Black Scorpion” Roger, nearly impaled by Fallen Mercury, vanished from Lumian’s sight, leaving behind the pewter-black dirk stained with blood.

Crash! “Baldy” Harman toppled the coffee table and lunged towards Lumian, who had just collapsed onto the sofa.

Lumian hastily raised his hand, but his body wavered, and he slumped to the ground.

In midair, his eyes caught a glimpse of “Baldy” Harman’s form, followed by lighting up with two beams of light resembling lightning.

Harman, on the verge of launching a close combat assault, experienced an anguish that penetrated the depths of his soul, forcing an involuntary scream to escape his lips.

His body froze, tilting backward. Franca, fresh from dispatching “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina, brandished a classic brass revolver in her right hand.

She aimed it at Harman’s bald head and swiftly pulled the trigger.

With a resounding bang, an obsidian bullet pierced Harman’s gleaming scalp, causing it to explode like a watermelon. A spray of red and white erupted in all

directions.

“Black Scorpion” Roger, having just manifested from the visage of an undead on the adjacent wall, witnessed the scene and emitted an unusually resentful and outraged howl.

Alongside this outcry, his eyes darkened, as though a fervent life burned within.

The blood that drenched the living room and the two lifeless bodies churned, surging towards “Baldy” Harman and “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina as if infused with a life force. The two victims adorned a crimson shroud, rising unsteadily to their feet.

The blood upon Fallen Mercury ignited, casting forth a radiant glow akin to the warmth of spring’s sun.

“Black Scorpion” Roger vividly recalled Margot’s demise, prompting his initial response to rid the evil dirk of the blood it bore and retaliate against the assailant, averting an inexplicable demise in battle.

His second response was to swiftly conclude the conflict and seek aid from Lady Moon. Even the Rebirth ritual proved incapable of absolving the influence of Ciel’s wicked dirk. The efficacy of solely burning the blood remained uncertain.

Indeed, he had recognized the assailant as that wretched lunatic, Ciel, through the pewter-black malevolent blade.

Cursed Ciel!

The radiant flames upon Fallen Mercury blazed along the blade, reaching towards Lumian’s fingertips. Without hesitation, Lumian cast aside the malevolent pewter-black dirk, letting it fall upon the ground amidst the contorted visages.

At this point, Fallen Mercury was no longer required.

The pewter-black dirk, which facilitated the exchange of destinies, merely utilized blood as a conduit; it did not depend on it. Once the fate officially entered the exchange process, the presence of blood would no longer influence subsequent developments.

As Lumian retrieved Fallen Mercury, the exchange of fates commenced.

He made no deliberate choices, allowing Fallen Mercury to exercise its own discretion.

Lumian braced his left hand against the pallid, indistinct faces strewn upon the ground. With the resilience bestowed by the Alms Monk, he rebounded onto the divan amidst the bone-chilling cold and rigidity.

No longer did the horrifying countenances of the undead pervade this space—only “Baldy” Harman and “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina, their original

appearances concealed beneath the flowing cascade of blood.

Simultaneously, the two lifeless bodies extended their arms and lunged at Lumian, seeking to ensnare him in their clutches.

Meanwhile, Franca leapt nimbly, alighting upon a chair with an air of weightlessness.

Unbeknownst to all, a thick frost had descended from the pallid-white or bluish-white ground, solidifying into a translucent sheen of ice.

This restrained the undead countenances, constraining their movements.

Almost concurrently, Franca's left hand, pressed against the hidden blade, tightened its grip, causing black flames to erupt within "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina's form, consuming her from within.

The lingering spirit of the blood-colored corpse emitted an ethereal crackling sound as its mutated body melted akin to a dripping candle, splashing upon the ground.

"Black Scorpion" Roger, relying upon the characteristic of the Undying Lands to shift locations, emitted yet another shrill cry.

A layer of black flames enkindled upon Franca's person.

In contrast to her own black flames, the black flames conjured by the Heretic Spellmaster exuded an overt malevolence, as if they consumed the life force and vitality of all who stood witness.

With a resounding crack, Franca's figure shattered, leaving behind naught but irregular shards of mirror.

Upon the icy veneer upon the ground, the Witch's form swiftly coalesced and leaped forth.

She had taken the initiative to create frost and freeze the ground not for restricting the movements of "Black Scorpion" Roger. Firstly, she sought to diminish the influence of the deceased spirits, and secondly, she aimed to gather ample materials for the Mirror Substitution.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Devoid of the pincer attack from "Short-legged Candlestick" Castina, Lumian deftly parried head-on, successfully evading the bloodied Harman. Springing onto the overturned coffee table, he withdrew his revolver and unleashed a volley of shots towards "Black Scorpion" Roger upon the wall. Concurrently, he produced the drawing depicting the peculiar sun.

He held no concern that his assault upon the target would disrupt the exchange of fates. For he was neither the wielder of Fallen Mercury, nor did he grasp its hilt.

The yellow bullets struck the wall with force, yet “Black Scorpion” Roger had already diminished into a wan, distorted, transparent countenance, vanishing from Lumian and Franca’s sight.

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Chapter 226 - 226 Sculpture

226 Sculpture

Lumian's left hand trembled, revealing the sun pattern that emitted a colorful glow.

The living room, once chilly, suddenly warmed up, but the frost on the ground remained stubbornly frozen. Only the pale, distorted faces turned away, unable to bear witness to what was about to unfold.

Harman, decapitated and drenched in blood, charged at Lumian, heedless of the revolver pointed his way, driven by a sinister desire to "embrace" his intended victim by force.

The drawing of the sun caused his body to tremble, and blood dripped from him onto the ground.

Instinctively, Lumian knew he couldn't engage in a direct confrontation with this "corpse." He used his light brown jacket to shield himself, pushing back against Harman's relentless assault.

The jacket quickly turned blood-red, showing signs of wear.

At that moment, "Black Scorpion" Roger had been absent for a couple of seconds, and Franca finally found an opportunity to act.

A dense black flame materialized in her palm, which she hurled at the zombified Harman.

The black flames struck the blood-stained corpse with the force of a cannonball, causing it to burst into silent flames that ignited the hidden spirituality within the blood and remains.

Harman began to melt, much like Castina, resembling a candle tossed in a blazing fire.

Just then, "Black Scorpion" Roger emerged from a corner, his face pale, cradling a sculpture of equal height in his arms.

The sculpture portrayed a woman with gentle features, her long dress intricately detailed and lifelike.

After exerting great effort to place the sculpture on the ground, Roger melded with the writhing, distorted faces around him, evading Lumian's shots and Franca's

black flames with impeccable timing.

In the next instant, he reappeared beneath the ceiling chandelier, cursing rapidly.

“You’re dead meat!”

“I’ll turn you into fertilizer!”

“Son of a bitch, daring to intrude upon my Undying Lands!”

“I’ll take every last one of your lives!”

“I want you to have 20 children!”

“Black Scorpion” Roger constantly changed positions as he spat out these words. He swiftly moved and leaped, skillfully dodging Lumian’s unfolded drawing and Franca’s array of witchcraft spells, primarily comprised of black flames and frost.

Each word, seemingly stemming from Intisian, pierced Lumian and Franca’s minds like an arrow. They felt dizzy and their blood resonated with the onslaught.

In the corner, the female sculpture activated, its surface blazing with brilliant flames.

Lumian’s head throbbed as if struck by an ethereal hammer. Bright red blood streamed uncontrollably from his nostrils.

Franca herself endured similar injuries. She suspected that “Black Scorpion” Roger was employing a curse-like incantation. Moreover, the female sculpture’s augmentation had greatly fortified his physical and spiritual presence. Franca couldn’t endure more than a few uttered words.

As “Black Scorpion” Roger had left the sculpture unprotected, Franca believed that a direct attack might result in even more dreadful consequences, likely taking the form of a curse.

Suppressing her boiling blood, dizziness, and bodily pain, she raised her brass revolver and fired at “Black Scorpion” Roger, seizing the chance to leap towards the sculpture.

The iron-black bullet shattered a contorted face, leaving marks on the wall, but it failed to harm Roger.

Once Franca landed, she swiftly circled around the sculpture. She didn’t squeeze the trigger of her brass revolver again, nor did she thrust with her blade. While evading the slender figures summoned by “Black Scorpion” Roger, she encased the sculpture in layers of frost.

Meanwhile, Lumian, who had been the focal point of Roger’s attention, found himself in imminent peril.

A piercing cry resounded as illusory black flames kindled upon Lumian's body.

It drained his life force with alarming speed, causing his physical strength to wane.

Without hesitation, Lumian discarded the peculiar sun drawing and lunged towards the sofa, reaching into his pocket with his left hand.

Beside the overturned coffee table, "Black Scorpion" Roger emerged from the icy seal, brandishing a pitch-black, malevolent scythe that stood half the height of a man. He cleaved through the furniture before him, rending it in two.

Lumian alighted on the sofa, his left hand withdrawing from his pocket, clutching a slender and slightly pale finger.

In the face of Roger's scythe, Lumian, already weakened, barely managed to evade the strike by shifting his body.

Simultaneously, he tossed the severed finger into the air.

It was Mr. K's finger!

Amidst the sound of tearing leather and fabric, the divan was sundered by the wicked scythe. The pale-white finger expanded and detonated like a bomb.

It metamorphosed into a shower of flesh and blood droplets that cascaded onto Lumian, extinguishing the fading black flames.

The flesh absorbed the surrounding blood and dissolved corpses, swiftly coalescing and draping Lumian in a cloak of blood-red hue.

The profound weakness that had plagued Lumian dissipated. He sprang up, launching a counteroffensive against "Black Scorpion" Roger.

Witnessing this, Roger avoided a direct confrontation. He retreated into the fractured ice and merged with one of the distorted faces.

Franca, who had already encased the sculpture in frost, suddenly felt an intense chill.

The restless spirits in the living room seemed incensed. They surged from all directions, extending their arms and gaping mouths, enveloping Franca.

With a resounding crack, yet another mirror shattered.

Franca's form materialized on the other side of the ice. She raised her hand, causing black flames to surge around the sculpture, setting ablaze the indistinct souls and blood-hued shadows.

"Black Scorpion" Roger peered out from a nearby wall and unleashed another curse, "Damn bitch!"

As he weakened his targets, he swiftly shifted positions with the aid of the tormented faces. Sometimes, he targeted Lumian, and other times, he assailed Franca. He relied on the power of the Undying Lands and the sculpture to single-handedly suppress the two foes.

At intervals, vile black flames ignited over Lumian's form, sapping his life force and diminishing his strength. Yet, each time, they were counteracted by the robe forged from flesh and blood. Franca evaded the combined assaults of Evil Word, Blood Spirit, Weak Black Flame, and Life Burning time and again, employing the technique of Mirror Substitution.

Time slipped away swiftly. Noticing that Ciel's robe of flesh and blood teetered on the brink of disintegration, while the mirror and ice that Franca had brought with her neared depletion, "Black Scorpion" Roger poked his head through the ceiling, a malicious chuckle escaping his lips.

"You fools!

"Do you truly believe you can withstand the might of the Undying Lands?

"I fear no consequence, even if the entire leadership of the Savoie Mob were to enter this domain!

"Go to hell!"

His cutting words pierced Lumian and Franca's ears and minds, causing their bodies to tremble as if they could bear no more.

Observing this, "Black Scorpion" Roger, who had already shifted to the adjacent wall, revealed a sinister smile, brimming with anticipation.

Suddenly, his vision darkened, and a surge of intense emotions overwhelmed his heart.

Disbelief, shock, confusion, and panic.

In the subsequent moment, he lost consciousness.

Thud!

The boss of the Poison Spur Mob materialized from the wall, collapsed onto the floor, and slipped into unconsciousness.

The fate exchange had finally concluded, as Fallen Mercury swapped the unconscious fate of the dying tramp with "Black Scorpion" Roger's!

It happened swiftly, much faster than the exchange involving Margot.

This was because the tramp was an ordinary person, and when Fallen Mercury selected "Black Scorpion" Roger's fate, it chose the least significant one,

unrelated to any Beyonder matters.

Lumian's gaze fixated on "Black Scorpion" Roger, clad in aqua-blue pajamas. Supported by his blood-colored robe, Lumian traversed the transparent and distorted faces, enduring the bone-chilling cold and stiffness. Finally, he reached his motionless target. Retrieving the metal canister containing the sedative, Lumian unscrewed the cap and squatted down.

He directed the sedative obtained from Rentas toward "Black Scorpion" Roger's nose, gently fanning the gas with his hand, ensuring its entry into the enemy's breath.

With that done, Lumian lifted "Black Scorpion" Roger and made his way out of the living room, guarded by Franca.

The valets and maids had long since fled.

As "Black Scorpion" Roger departed the living room, the bluish-white faces swiftly faded away, and everything returned to normal.

Witnessing this, Lumian dropped the Poison Spur Mob leader to the ground and aimed his revolver at the man's head.

After a few seconds of contemplation, Lumian pulled the trigger calmly and silently.

Two shots rang out, transforming "Black Scorpion" Roger's head into a burst watermelon, splattering blood in every direction.

He met his demise while in a coma.

Franca glanced at Lumian, still aiming at "Black Scorpion" Roger, and asked calmly,

"How is it? Have you vented all your frustrations?"

If it weren't for Franca's desire to assist Lumian, she would have considered reporting "Black Scorpion" Roger and his associates for their belief in the Great Mother.

Lumian fell silent for a moment, his lips curling into a smile.

"No.

"It merely resolved one hidden danger."

Franca let out a soft sigh.

"In my homeland, we say that to cure a heart's ailment, the remedy must come from within. But if you don't do it right, no matter how much you try, it's futile.

“Well, I’ll quickly communicate with the spirit, and let’s strive to depart this place within three minutes. Hurry and seize the spoils.”

“Alright,” Lumian responded, as the remaining bloodstained garments on his body disintegrated, staining the ground red.

That’s it? Lumian couldn’t help but furrow his brow.

It wasn’t that Mr. K’s finger lacked strength. On the contrary, without it, Lumian would have been too feeble to resist and would have required Franca’s aid.

However, its performance fell short if made to face the formidable evil spirit, Susanna Mattise. Lumian couldn’t help but feel disappointed and perplexed.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, he headed toward the living room, scanning his surroundings for valuable items.

Suddenly, he noticed a figure cloaked in a large hood and black robe standing quietly on the staircase.

Mr. K!

Lumian’s pupils dilated, but in an instant, Mr. K vanished into the shadows.

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Chapter 227 - 227 Agent

227 Agent

Did the finger serve as a signal? How did Mr. K manage to arrive so swiftly? Or was he perhaps observing me from nearby? Lumian felt a surge of tension, his weariness from the battle fading considerably.

This revelation granted him a fresh understanding of Mr. K's power, fueling his fear.

Lumian averted his gaze and retrieved Fallen Mercury,

its blade tarnished by the scorching and decay. He couldn't help but wonder if it would endure until the year's end.

After securing Fallen Mercury, Lumian proceeded to examine the two corpses that had mostly disintegrated under the deluge of blood.

The victims displayed clear signs of petrification, rendering them motionless on the ground, and their ghastly appearance would haunt anyone who laid eyes on them for years to come.

The clothing and personal effects of the deceased suffered extensive corrosion, including Harman's poisoned dirk and Castina's cherished axe.

Among the few items that remained relatively unscathed were several specially crafted canisters with an iron hue, emitting a flickering metallic sheen. Although they bore noticeable signs of corrosion on their surfaces, the liquid contents remained unaffected.

Lumian scrutinized the canisters and discerned four distinct types, distinguished by etched patterns: a tree, a bear-like face, a spring fountain, and a scorpion.

Harman and Castina had each carried one, leaving a total of eight canisters.

Gathering them up, Lumian approached the peculiar scythe recently wielded by "Black Scorpion" Roger. It exuded an ominous aura, its pitch-black blade sharp and menacing. It wasn't as compact as a wheat-harvesting scythe, nor as colossal as a giant weapon. It lacked the capacity to shock onlookers and measured only half the height of an average person.

The moment Lumian's black-gloved hand touched the scythe, he sensed an ethereal spike extending from it, piercing into his flesh and gradually siphoning his life force. It felt chilling and merciless.

Swiftly retracting his hand, Lumian realized that his life was no longer ebbing away slowly.

Is it a mystical artifact or a Beyonder weapon akin to Fallen Mercury… How can I remove it safely? Lumian delved into deep contemplation.

Just then, Franca finished her preparations and commenced spirit channeling.

Lumian returned to "Black Scorpion" Roger's corpse, carrying the eight canisters, and communicated with Franca through the wall of spirituality, saying, "Inquire about the purpose of these objects and how to transport the scythe."

Franca nodded and directed her gaze toward Roger's face, which materialized on the mirrored surface.

"What effects do these canisters on Harman and Castina have? How can I identify them?"

Roger, his face pale and bewildered, replied, "The tree-patterned one is Bark Agent. It toughens your skin and muscles, rendering them as resilient as trees.

"The bear-faced pattern is Berserk Agent. It grants you extraordinary strength when unleashed.

"The spring fountain pattern represents Healing Agent. It mends most external wounds, alleviates severe injuries, and eliminates minor ailments.

"The scorpion pattern is 'Scorpion Poison.' It is primarily used on weapons and induces arrhythmia and respiratory paralysis, ultimately leading to death."

Quite useful indeed… Franca silently praised.

Her Hidden Blade would greatly benefit from a canister of Scorpion Poison.

Franca persisted with her questioning.

"How do you usually transport that scythe?"

"In my study, there's a large wooden box. Put it inside quickly, and you can take it away," replied Roger, his face pale and devoid of emotion.

Franca pressed further, "Is the scythe a mystical object or a Beyonder weapon? What are its abilities?"

"It's called Harvest Sacrifice. It's a weapon infused with a blessed aura and possesses the quality of sharpness. Once it inflicts a wound on the target, and that wound becomes tainted with the corresponding blood, it can continuously drain the life force of the other party," Roger described the scythe in a dazed manner.

Seizing the opportunity, Franca redirected the conversation to more crucial matters.

“Have you encountered Madame Moon? How do you maintain contact with her?”

Roger’s pale face contorted with pain.

“I met Madame Moon in the wilderness. Well, now she’s Lady Moon. She sat in a peculiar carriage pulled by two demons, wearing a veil that made her appear holy and maternal to me.

“Usually, she seeks me out and commands me to venture into the wilderness abruptly.

“She gave me a green seed to place inside the statue’s abdominal cavity. If I face danger, I can use it to urgently contact her.

“But there’s no need for the seed now. By reciting her full honorific name, I can elicit her response.”

She can respond to an honorific name? That’s quite advanced… Franca refrained from inquiring about Lady Moon’s honorific name, fearing that the other party might detect her intention.

Although she could already surmise the answer, she asked out of curiosity, “Why didn’t you seek Lady Moon’s assistance earlier?”

Roger replied, his gaze vacant, “I can win.”

You clung to your delusion until the very end, didn’t you? Franca clicked her tongue and remarked, “Why are you supporting Hugues Artois?”

“Lady Moon instructed us to aid in his election,” Roger replied with a blank expression. “She claimed that Hugues Artois is an open-minded individual.”

Open-minded… What does that mean? Franca struggled to comprehend this assessment.

As Franca channeled “Black Scorpion” Roger, Lumian didn’t linger by her side. Instead, he ventured into the study, assuming Alsai’s appearance, and began sifting through valuable items.

Armed with a short wire, he attempted to unlock the safe door, but his efforts proved futile.

Within the study, he discovered a suitable wooden box for housing the sinister scythe. Carrying it, he descended the stairs to the open-door basement.

The area appeared tidy, except for a stone platform suspected of holding the statue, devoid of any other objects.

Employing his keen observation skills as a Hunter, Lumian scoured the vicinity and uncovered a concealed door.

With a grating sound, he pushed open the secret passage and revealed a corridor beyond. On either side of the corridor stood prison cells enclosed by iron bars. Dozens, if not hundreds, of people were crammed inside. Most appeared destitute, but among them were well-dressed gentlemen, ladies, and seemingly lost children.

In that moment, nearly a third of the captives lay lifeless on the floor, their skin shriveled and lacking vitality. They resembled skeletons more than human beings.

They no longer drew breath, and they had lost control of their bodily functions. The stench permeated the private prison.

Lumian's gaze swept over the trembling individuals, and he noticed numerous sinister and peculiar symbols etched upon the ground, the wall behind them, and the iron fence in front.

No wonder a Heretic Spellmaster wields such formidable power on their home turf… Lumian reached a realization.

Not only did they possess the backing of a "magic circle" teeming with deceased souls, but they could also extract the life force of others at will to replenish their own!

Balancing the wooden box with one arm, Lumian retrieved his revolver, pressed it against the door of a cell, and pulled the trigger.

With a resounding bang, the iron lock shattered and clattered to the ground.

After reloading, Lumian paid little attention to the captives. He progressed methodically, obliterating the iron locks of the remaining cells.

Then, with the revolver holstered under his armpit, he turned and departed, leaving behind a bewildered and numbed group of survivors.

When Lumian returned to the ground floor, Franca had just concluded the spirit channeling and dispelled the spiritual barrier.

"Did you discover anything?" Franca inquired casually.

Lumian gestured toward the wooden box nestled under his left arm.

"It should suffice for storing the scythe. I couldn't access the safe. It's possible that the servants fled to the second floor or the garden at the back. I didn't encounter them."

"Don't concern yourself with them. As followers of an evil deity, they will meet a swift demise once their protection wanes. Furthermore, we have disguised ourselves adequately to avoid recognition," Franca affirmed with a nod. "Pack up

Harvest Sacrifice. We shall depart now. Oh, by the way, the scythe is called Harvest Sacrifice."

Before long, Lumian returned to "Black Scorpion" Roger's lifeless body with the scythe in hand, presenting the wooden box to Franca.

Then, he squatted down, tore off a section of his pajamas, crumpled it into a ball, and stained it with blood.

Curious, Franca inquired, "What are you doing?"

Lumian remained focused, his gaze fixed on the task at hand, and succinctly replied, "Providing a hint to the official Beyonders."

With the blood-stained cloth in hand, Lumian made his way back to the living room. Beside the serene female statue, he messily inscribed words in Intisian: "Great Mother."

Having completed the task, Lumian discarded the cloth bundle and headed towards the door.

Why does it seem so provocative… Franca sighed and turned around.

Behind her, dark flames materialized and ascended, consuming the traces left by both of them and the lingering Spirit Bodies of the deceased.

Shortly after, Franca scattered shimmering powder and recited the incantation of invisibility. She disappeared from the foyer, clutching the wooden box.

Lumian pushed open the door and confidently stepped out onto 126 Avenue du Marché.

He left the door ajar, allowing the scene within to be exposed to passersby.

Under the yellowish glow of the gas wall lamps, a lifeless body lay in the foyer, surrounded by blood.

Lumian crossed Avenue du Marché, constantly altering his course, until he reached the alley where he had changed his clothes and assumed his disguise.

He wiped his face clean and donned his original attire, no longer emanating the aura of Alsai.

In the next moment, Franca transformed into her hooded figure, draped in black robes. She retrieved the Ring of Punishment from Lumian and returned it to her coin bag.

The Witch glanced at the unconscious Poison Spur Mob member, Alsai, and said to Lumian, who was about to depart, "Aren't you going to take care of him?

“He knows Ciel knocked him out, and the person who killed ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger posed as him.”

Lumian remained silent. He drew his revolver, partially turned, and fired at Alsai, clad in a blue-and-white striped shirt.

Two gunshots rang out as the Poison Spur Mob member, trusted by “Black Scorpion” Roger, was struck in the chest and met his demise.

Observing Lumian’s nonchalant demeanor, Franca shook her head inwardly and proceeded to deal with the remaining Spirit Body and traces in the alley.

Then, she concealed herself once more and departed alongside Lumian. He scaled the outer wall and returned to the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.

After using a special lotion from Rentas to remove the excess black dye from his hair and transforming back into Ciel Dubois, Lumian, Franca smiled and inquired, “Do you want to keep this scythe? If not, I’ll sell it and we’ll split the proceeds evenly.

“Your Provoker potion should be almost fully digested. You’ll need to gather funds and ingredients for your advancement.”

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Chapter 228 - 228 Sudden Digestion

228 Sudden Digestion

Upon Franca's mention of advancement, Lumian felt a sudden urge to make preparations.

It wasn't that he didn't aspire to become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac and master mysticism techniques, but the Hunter and Provoker potion formulas were bestowed upon him by Madam Magician, making them easily obtainable and reducing the sense of urgency. His plan was to wait until the Provoker potion had fully digested before writing a letter to Madam Magician, inquiring about the price for obtaining everything necessary for his advancement.

More importantly, Lumian knew that Madam Magician possessed a Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.

But now that he thought about it, he felt that he had to make additional preparations.

It occurred to him that Madam Magician might not be associated with the Hunter pathway, which meant she might not possess the Pyromaniac potion formula. Furthermore, she could have already given the Beyonder characteristic to someone else. Lumian couldn't be the only one with the Minor Arcana card, and it was unlikely that they all belonged to different pathways.

While Madam Magician's level and abilities made it relatively easy for her to acquire the Pyromaniac potion formula and its main ingredient, she might be unwilling or face unforeseen delays.

Lost in thought, Lumian glanced at the wooden box resting on Franca's lap and hesitated before suggesting, "Let's sell it."

The evil scythe possessed an uncanny sharpness and the ability to drain an enemy's life through blood, perfectly suited to Lumian's close-quarters combat style. However, it proved highly inconvenient to carry and conceal due to its usage restrictions. Most of the time, Lumian could only store it at Salle de Bal Brise or Auberge du Coq Doré, relying on it when attacked. Alternatively, he could draw it in advance and hide it in the cover of night shadows for offensive purposes.

If Lumian wished to have it with him at all times, his only solution was to acquire a cello case and carry it on his back.

Yet, for a mobster leader, this would raise suspicions.

In fact, if Franca hadn't brought up the topic of preparing for his advancement, Lumian would have deemed his current stash of 4,000 verl d'or far from sufficient. He needed to acquire more funds. Keeping the evil scythe, known as Harvest Sacrifice, wasn't a problem as it could still prove useful in certain situations. If necessary, Lumian could use the Mystery Prying Glasses to disguise himself as a musician, carrying the cello on his back to assassinate his intended target.

Franca sighed in response.

"I suppose selling it is our only option. It's actually quite good, but it doesn't suit my combat style."

She then gestured towards Lumian's waist.

"How about we each get a canister?"

To be honest, Franca wasn't particularly interested in the Berserk Agent and the Bark Agent. She only desired the Scorpion Poison and the Healing Agent. However, considering that Lumian also required poison for his weapons and healing capabilities, she opted for a fair solution.

"Alright," Lumian agreed.

…

In the dead of the night, outside 126 Avenue du Marché:

A group of police officers, dressed in black uniforms, formed a barricade to keep pedestrians away from the building behind them.

Within the house, Angoulême de Fran?ois with his blond hair, eyebrows, and beard, stood before a delicate female sculpture. His gaze fixed upon the blood-red words adorning the wall.

Donning a row of golden buttons on his chest, he remained silent, emanating an overwhelming sense of oppression that affected both the surrounding Purifiers and police officers.

After a moment, the Purifier of Southern Continent descent emerged from the basement and approached Angoulême. In hushed tones, he spoke, "Deacon, we have found clear signs of sacrificial rituals to an evil god beneath us. There are deceased individuals who were used as living sacrifices."

"The prison cells have been unlocked, and some of the abductees managed to escape. Those who remain informed me that 'Black Scorpion' Roger did indeed employ sorcery."

Angoulême listened impassively, scanning his surroundings. He then addressed the nearby police officers, saying, "Did none of you notice the significant number

of people who had gone missing?

“Who was it that claimed the market district housed only a handful of controllable Beyonders? Who suggested that arresting them would only pave the way for new criminal organizations, causing even greater chaos?”

His voice, filled with anger, reverberated through the living room of 126 Avenue du Marché, causing each police officer to lower their gaze.

At that moment, Angoulême abruptly turned his attention to the delicate female sculpture. He sensed a fleeting surge of anger emanating from it, quickly dissipating.

He had sensed a faint fluctuation of anger there, but it disappeared in a flash.

A golden light enveloped Angoulême’s body as he extended his right palm, opening the abdomen of the statue.

There, a cavity large enough to cradle a curled-up human revealed itself. Within it rested a brownish-green seed, silently crumbling into dust when stirred by the wind.

…

On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian furrowed his brow abruptly.

“What’s wrong?” Franca asked.

Lumian found himself torn between elation and confusion.

“My Provoker potion has fully digested.

“Could it be that some important figure was provoked by our actions?”

Franca speculated, “Perhaps Lady Moon, or maybe an official Beyonder?”

“All possibilities,” Lumian conceded. If he couldn’t unravel the mystery, there was no use dwelling on it. After all, it was a positive development.

This meant that he could now advance to become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac!

This realization struck him with a newfound understanding.

He didn’t need to meticulously summarize all the principles of acting to fully digest the corresponding potion.

By summarizing a portion of his acting principles and consistently receiving feedback while performing appropriately, he could rely on quantity or the accumulation of time to digest the potion.

Hence, most Beyonders can rely on time and fortunate encounters to digest the potion without being familiar with the acting method… Lumian pondered silently, feeling enlightened.

After distributing the agents and deciding to sell the remaining spoils for money, Lumian bid Franca farewell. Deliberately, he circled Salle de Bal Brise before departing Avenue du Marché and returning to Auberge du Coq Doré.

As he reached the second floor, he noticed that the door to Room 206 stood ajar, allowing the light from a carbide lamp to spill into the dim corridor.

Curiosity piqued, Lumian glanced inside as he passed by, spotting Gabriel seated by the bed in his preferred black dungarees, observing the hallway outside.

"You're finally back!" the playwright exclaimed with delight upon seeing Lumian.

Raising an eyebrow, Lumian queried, "You haven't been arrested by the police yet?"

"…" Gabriel found himself momentarily speechless.

After a few seconds, his joy overcame him, and he replied, "Monsieur Nathan Lopp didn't report me to the police. In fact, he signed a contract with me and purchased my script.

"He intended to make a down payment of 1,500 verl d'or, but considering how we frightened him, he deducted 500. Once the play commences, I'll receive 2.5% of the ticket revenue for each show."

A soft chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.

"I thought the revolver had coerced him into agreement, fully expecting him to go back on his word. I never imagined that your script would genuinely move him."

If you thought so, why did you still do it? Gabriel grumbled instinctively.

He elaborated, "Monsieur Lopp understands the idiosyncrasies of artists and doesn't mind such matters. He mentioned that his previous mistress was a female painter. She not only kept a sheep on his balcony but also attempted to flirt with men. She even prepared fake props to try and convince him, which ultimately led to their breakup."

"You Trieriens…" Lumian sighed, even as the Prankster King of Cordu.

Gabriel, hailing from a different province and not being a Trierien himself, took Ciel's teasing in stride, unfazed by the remark.

He expressed his gratitude sincerely. "Thank you very much. Although I don't agree with your approach, Monsieur Lopp would have never laid eyes on my script without your help."

Gabriel, perplexed, questioned, “Monsieur Lopp mentioned that we authors weren’t cautious enough. We only covered our faces once we reached his doorstep. After conversing with the guard at the lobby, he knew what we looked like. Once he calls the police, there’s no escape for any of us.

“Why didn’t you mask up earlier when we tied up the guard?”

Gabriel believed that Ciel, being a mob leader, should have been more cautious.

Lumian responded calmly, “Why should I have masked myself?”

“…” Confusion filled Gabriel’s face as he asked, “Then why did you eventually mask yourself?”

Lumian replied calmly, “Because Jenna masked up.”

What kind of logic is this… Even as a playwright himself, he found it difficult to comprehend Ciel’s thoughts.

He could sense that Ciel’s state last night was abnormal, but he didn’t know the exact reason. It was difficult to determine his mental state and the motives behind his actions.

Gabriel let out a sigh and remarked, “Fortunately, things turned out well. Otherwise, we would have been apprehended by the police…”

He paused for a moment, realizing that Ciel was a leader of the Savoie Mob. The crimes he had committed in the past were more serious than what happened last night. There was no need to fear. Even if the police came looking for him, he could hide for a day or two, and the matter would pass. No one would pursue him for such a trivial case.

Lumian chuckled and gave Gabriel’s shoulder a friendly pat.

“Even if you get caught, you’re just an accomplice. You didn’t carry a weapon. You can secure your release by posting bail.”

With that, Lumian walked towards his room and opened the door to Room 207.

Gabriel watched Ciel’s retreating figure, feeling a mixture of confusion and relief.

…

In Room 207, Lumian carefully examined Fallen Mercury.

He felt that if the dirk wasn’t repaired, it could last a maximum of three months.

Perhaps I should consult Franca. She might know a few individuals skilled in the mending of mystical artifacts and Beyonder weapons… Lumian half-closed his eyes and established a connection with Fallen Mercury, seeking communication.

After a while, he discerned the swapped fate that had taken place.

The destiny of “Black Scorpion” Roger gulping down alcohol.

Lumian carefully stored Fallen Mercury, stood up, and exited the room, making his way to the third floor.

Approaching the door of Room 310, he overheard the lunatic’s frantic cries, still filled with fear.

“I’m dying, I’m dying!”

Lumian pulled out the short wire, unlocking the door. He then beheld the lunatic crouched on the moonlit floor, clutching his head and trembling uncontrollably.

Leaning against the door frame, Lumian couldn’t help but let out a chuckle.

“You’re rather fortunate. The Montsouris ghost hasn’t come to claim your life just yet. I wonder if it’s preoccupied or slacking off.”

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Chapter 229 - 229 Equivalent Exchange

229 Equivalent Exchange

The lunatic still wore a grimy linen shirt and yellow trousers, as if changing clothes was not part of his plan.

Upon hearing Lumian's words, he looked up, revealing a face obscured by a black beard.

It seemed as though he had forgotten Lumian entirely. His blue eyes were empty, clouded over.

"I'm dying, I'm dying!" He clutched his shoulder, which was hidden beneath his unruly black hair, and let out another terrified scream.

Lumian approached, his left hand gloved in black, and drew out Fallen Mercury. With a swift motion, he plunged it into the lunatic's shoulder.

The filthy linen shirt tore open, revealing a shallow wound that still oozed blood.

The lunatic stood frozen, as if the long-awaited judgment had finally arrived.

After a few seconds, he collapsed to the ground, placing his hands on the floor as he scrambled away from Lumian.

In his terror, he cried out, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

The tenants in the neighboring rooms heard the commotion, but none of them bothered to investigate. The lunatic often ranted about his impending demise and pleaded not to be killed.

The sinister pewter-black dagger had already left the lunatic's shoulder, and Lumian continued to gaze at the shimmering river of mercury, lost in thought.

He witnessed the blissful first half of the lunatic's life and the tragic deaths of his family, one by one. It was as though Lumian could relate to the sensation of a complete mental breakdown caused by an overwhelming blow.

At times, Lumian yearned to break down like the lunatic, to abandon all reason and act on primal instincts until his own demise. However, there was still a glimmer of hope—a minuscule, almost unrealistic hope—and he was not ready to relinquish it. He desired to pursue it.

Thus, he often acted impulsively and displayed self-destructive tendencies, yet he was always restrained by the rationality that stemmed from that flicker of hope. He never truly disregarded the consequences, existing in a state of profound contradiction.

Knowing precisely which fate he wished to exchange and its approximate date, Lumian swiftly located the lunatic's destiny of encountering the Montsouris ghost in the underground market district. With the tip of the blade, he pried it loose, transforming it into a droplet of liquid mercury. The drinking fate originally belonging to "Black Scorpion" Roger flowed into the lunatic's body.

Ignoring the lunatic's terrified pleas, Lumian squatted before him. He wiped the blade of Fallen Mercury clean with his clothes and assisted in staunching the bleeding.

Then, Lumian pulled up the only chair and took a seat, patiently awaiting the completion of the fate exchange.

"I'm dying, I'm dying!

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

As the lunatic shrieked, time ticked by. Finally, Fallen Mercury quivered gently.

The lunatic's voice abruptly ceased. He rose to his feet, his gaze clearing as he muttered to himself, "I need a drink. I need a drink…"

Lumian smiled and stood up. "The drinks are on you. Consider it a reward for helping you escape the Montsouris ghost."

Naturally, the true reward was the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost. With careful planning and an unguarded target, it served as an excellent tool for assassination.

The lunatic appeared startled for a moment before replying, "You got rid of it?"

"You can choose not to believe me." Lumian turned and walked into the dimly lit corridor, devoid of wall lamps.

The lunatic, driven by an insatiable thirst for drink, unwittingly trailed after Lumian.

As they made their way to the basement bar, the lunatic glanced around and noticed a distinct change in his surroundings.

The eerie sensation of being watched from the shadows had vanished!

Perplexed, the lunatic settled himself at the bar counter and ordered two glasses of oatmeal beer—one for Lumian and the other for himself. He downed his own glass, leaving traces of foam clinging to the corners of his mouth.

Since he occasionally visited the bar in moments of sobriety, no one suspected anything amiss.

After quenching his alcohol craving, the lunatic turned to Lumian and asked once more,

“Have I truly escaped the Montsouris ghost? How did you manage it?”

“I’ve slain the Montsouris ghost, but I can’t be certain if it will resurrect,” Lumian replied solemnly. “However, if those who previously encountered it are still among the living, they shall be free from its torment. Remember, I mentioned encountering the Montsouris ghost myself. Look at me—I’m alive and well.”

“Really?” The lunatic found it hard to believe that this handsome young man had defeated the Montsouris ghost.

Not even the Church had succeeded!

Lumian smiled.

“I lied. I merely discovered an incantation that prevents the Montsouris ghost from plaguing me, but I require the blood of someone haunted as a conduit.”

A glimmer of understanding flickered in the lunatic’s eyes.

“No wonder you stabbed me.”

Blushing with embarrassment, he admitted, “I may not be able to compensate you at present. My savings are meager, and I must find new employment…”

Lumian interrupted, “What shall I call you?”

“Just Flameng will do,” the lunatic replied before inquiring, “And you?”

“Ciel.” Lumian downed his oatmeal beer.

By the time his glass contained only a thin film of liquid, Flameng had become quite tipsy. He grasped Lumian’s arm and babbled on.

“Did you know? I used to be a university lecturer. Simultaneously, I was entrusted with the safety of some students.

“Many of those students were audacious and reckless, daring to engage in any endeavor and shout slogans of ‘freedom’ when challenged.

“They even held proms in the catacombs, burning the bones of nameless corpses to warm their asses. They believed in nothing and feared nothing. Of course, I was much the same in those days.”

Flameng recounted tales from the first half of his life, his tone shifting between pride, happiness, admonishment of the present ills, and wistful reminiscence.

“Might you have entered the Underground Trier to dissuade certain students from taking risks?” Lumian asked casually, taking a sip of his beer.

Flameng shook his head.

“No, my expertise lies in minerals. The subterranean rock formations of Trier are uniquely fascinating for study. Together with the medical school, we even established a Museum of Mineralogy and Pathology in the catacombs.

“I had been leaving the museum, making my way toward the underground market district with the intention of heading home when I encountered the Montsouris ghost.

“My Sandrine… My Bastian…”

Flameng clutched his head, his voice filled with an agonizing pain.

Lumian quickly changed the subject.

“So, the subterranean rock formations in Trier are quite unique?”

“Indeed,” Flameng instinctively replied, before collecting himself and continuing, “We even assigned poetic names to those formations. From top to bottom, they’re referred to as ‘flowers,’ ‘sheep,’ and ‘sedges’…”

Engrossed in conversation, Lumian and Flameng chatted well into the midnight hours. The latter appeared lively, and even his bearded face seemed to regain some color.

He didn’t lose his sanity again. Having confirmed that there was no longer a feeling of being watched in the darkness, he returned to normal.

After bidding a cheerful farewell to the intoxicated Flameng, Lumian smiled and withdrew his gaze. He entered Room 207 to compose a letter to Madam Magician.

In the letter, he first mentioned how Termiboros had nearly influenced him into transferring Charlie’s luck and how he had slain “Black Scorpion” Roger and other Lady Moon subordinates. Lumian then revealed that the Provoker potion had been completely digested due to the latter. He inquired whether Madam Magician possessed the Pyromaniac potion formula and the associated Beyonder characteristic, as well as the price he needed to pay for them.

Not long after Lumian had tidied up the room and summoned a puppet messenger to deliver the letter, he received a reply from Madam Magician:

“Good job. You’ve already recognized the potential influence and threat that long-named fellow poses to you. Stay vigilant.

“Based on your description, this Lady Moon should be a Sequence 3. Being able to truly provoke such a demigod will undoubtedly hasten your digestion of the potion.

“If I recall correctly, you are attending Mr. K’s gathering tomorrow night and will inform him that you can worship that being. This means you will truly become one of them, completing the initial phase of the mission I assigned you. As a reward, I will provide you with the Pyromaniac potion formula free of charge.

“I still possess the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic, but remember, the principle of equivalent exchange must be upheld.

“In Intis, the two main ingredients of the Pyromaniac potion cost more than 18,000 verl d’or, often exceeding 20,000. Correspondingly, the Beyonder characteristic usually amounts to around 35,000 verl d’or.

“What does this mean? It implies that many people in Intis have become Pyromaniacs, yet many Pyromaniacs have also perished.

“As a holder of a Minor Arcana card, I will offer you a substantial discount. The Beyonder characteristic will only cost you 30,000 verl d’or.

“Good luck.”

Phew, 30,000 verl d’or… Lumian exhaled, feeling that the sum was not unattainable.

He already had over 4,000 verl d’or in savings, and the evil scythe known as Harvest Sacrifice could fetch a decent price. Additionally, he could borrow some funds from Franca and embezzle a portion of Salle de Bal Brise’s money. These combined efforts would bring him close to 30,000 verl d’or.

And just as Lumian had suspected, Lady Moon had transformed from a mere Madame to a Lady capable of birthing deities. She was undoubtedly more than a Sequence 4.

Fortunately, we had feigned impending defeat in our previous battle, preventing “Black Scorpion” Roger from seeking assistance… Lumian burned Madam Magician’s letter, freshened up, climbed into bed, and drifted off to sleep.

…

Just after six in the morning, Lumian had finished washing up and changed into a crisp white shirt, black vest, brown pants, and sleek leather boots, when he heard footsteps descending from the third floor.

It was Ruhr and Michel, clad in tattered clothes and emanating a pungent odor.

As Lumian stood by the door of Room 207, Ruhr, his voice filled with panic, cried out, “Ciel, Monsieur Ciel! That lunatic is dead!”

Dead? Flameng is dead? Lumian was momentarily stunned before darting past Ruhr and Michel, making his way to the third floor.

The door to Room 310 was wide open. Lumian cast a quick glance inside and spotted Flameng hanging from the window.

He faced the door, having cleanly shaven his face, revealing a gentle and gaunt visage.

Now, he no longer breathed. His face had turned blue, his eyes slightly bulging. His mouth hung open wide, and the morning light streamed through the window, bathing his lifeless body. He hung silently, suspended by a belt tied to the window frame.

Beneath him, on the wooden table, lay a nearly extinguished kerosene lamp, several large books, and a white sheet of paper weighted down by a fountain pen. It appeared that something had been written on it.

Lumian fell into an eerie silence for a few seconds before cautiously approaching the white sheet of paper.

In precise Intisian handwriting, it read:

“When I was deranged, I still harbored the will to live.

“Upon awakening, I found no purpose in life.

“Please lay me to rest in the Underground Tomb of Lights within the catacombs.”

Lumian raised his gaze, meeting the vacant blue eyes that seemed to peer back from beyond the grave.

He stood in solemn silence, transfixed, as if time had come to a halt.

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Chapter 230 - 230 Scapegoat

230 Scapegoat

At the stroke of 8 a.m., a pair of law enforcement officers ambled up to the third floor of Auberge du Coq Doré. One meticulously examined the lifeless body, the suicide note, and the surroundings, while the other commenced interrogating the neighboring tenants.

Lumian, already disguised using the Mystery Prying Glasses, had taken his position at the entrance of Room 310.

The officer, donning a uniform and clutching a pen and paper, cast a fleeting glance in his direction.

“You must be Ciel Dubois. Enlighten me on the matter.”

Lumian proceeded to recount how Flameng’s sanity was gone prior to his arrival. The man incessantly raved about encountering the Montsouris ghost and the demise of his own kin. Soon, it seemed, his turn was imminent. Lumian continued, revealing how Flameng had abruptly regained consciousness the previous night and indulged in a bout of heavy drinking.

“What about the wound on his shoulder?” interjected the officer attending to the deceased in the room.

“Before he regained consciousness last night, he inflicted the injury upon himself. I was the one who bound it up,” Lumian responded with composure.

After interrogating the other tenants and the proprietor of the basement bar, the two officers cautiously deduced that the deceased had long been plagued by mental instability. He possessed a motive for suicide and displayed corresponding behavioral tendencies.

As they maneuvered Flameng’s body into the mortuary bag, they addressed Lumian, saying, “We shall transport him to the catacombs, but it’s a rather intricate procedure. It entails ascertaining the precise cause of death, summoning a clergyman for purification rites, finding a suitable heir for his estate, and liaising with the catacomb administrators. This will take roughly a week or two.”

Lumian fell silent momentarily before resuming, “I’ve shared a few drinks with him. Remember to inform me when you lay him to rest.”

Affirming their agreement, the two officers departed Auberge du Coq Doré, taking Flameng’s body and the belongings from the room along with them.

Lumian removed his disguise and returned to Room 207.

Seated in a chair, his back to the window casting sunlight, he faced the dimly lit corridor, grappling with a swirl of emotions.

Flameng's suicide had presented Lumian with an alternative fate.

Lumian had aided Flameng in evading the Montsouris ghost, not driven by a desire for personal gain or reward. It was simply because he saw a reflection of his own predicament in the man who had lost his family. One had succumbed completely, descending into lunacy, while the other persevered, clinging to a glimmer of hope and desperately struggling to maintain his grasp on reason.

But in the end, Flameng, no longer tormented by the Montsouris ghost and driven to madness by fear, had opted to terminate his own existence.

In the corridor, Elodie, her tresses concealed beneath a blonde wig and her eyes accentuated with eyeshadow, alongside the other cleaning lady, had already commenced their bustling day. They worked ceaselessly, mopping the floors and battling bedbugs without respite.

Lumian observed silently, his gaze appearing distant and unfocused.

After the passage of nearly fifteen minutes, light yet hurried footfalls reverberated along the staircase, eventually reaching Room 207.

Jenna's silhouette came into Lumian's view. Today, she donned a more understated attire compared to her usual flamboyance. Her blouse clung slightly, complementing the gentle brown shade of her top and a fluffy, beige, short skirt. She sported knee-high black boots, and her makeup exuded both decadence and allure.

She glanced at Lumian, entered Room 207, and gently shut the wooden door behind her.

Lumian snapped out of his reverie and observed her silently, refraining from questioning her intentions.

Jenna repressed her curiosity and excitement before speaking up.

"Have you heard? The boss and two leaders of the Poison Spur Gang have been murdered!"

"I'm aware," Lumian acknowledged with a nod.

Jenna scrutinized his expression and deliberately probed further.

"You weren't involved, were you?"

“Do you think I possess the capability to eliminate ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger, ‘Baldy’ Harman, and ‘Short-legged Candlestick’ Castina all at once?” Lumian retorted.

Jenna, having already gleaned an estimation of Ciel’s strength from Franca, understood that “Black Scorpion” Roger was no less formidable than Franca herself. She shook her head and uttered, “No.”

She then drawled in a leisurely tone, “But you can still seek assistance.”

For instance, Franca.

“The authorities don’t even suspect me,” Lumian stated, shrugging his shoulders.

In truth, he found this matter rather perplexing.

Ordinarily, as one of the few individuals who had recently engaged in a direct confrontation with the Poison Spur Gang, he would undoubtedly be subjected to questioning following such an incident. Yet, Lumian had remained on standby since last night, prepared to don a disguise at a moment’s notice, yet no investigators had arrived.

Just then, hurried footsteps echoed from the staircase.

Knock, knock, knock. Knocks resounded against the door of Room 207.

Charlie? Lumian’s gaze fixated on the door as he beckoned, “Come in. It’s not locked.”

The visitor who stood before them was none other than Charlie. Clad in a crisp white shirt, a light-colored vest, and a formal black suit, he exuded an air of dignity. Atop his head rested a half top hat, while a dark bow tie completed his ensemble.

His attire seemed even more refined than when he served as an attendant at H?tel du Cygne Blanc.

After sizing up Charlie, Lumian couldn’t help but smile.

“Well, well, where did this civilized individual come from?”

Charlie couldn’t conceal his own grin. His tone brimmed with warmth and enthusiasm as he replied, “Right? I am now a true gentleman. I’m still in the process of mastering classical grammar. Madame, Monsieur, please allow me to extend my civilized greetings.”

With those words, he removed his half top hat, pressed it against his chest, and offered a slight bow.

Jenna chuckled but didn't discourage Charlie. Lumian clicked his tongue and remarked, "To be frank, you're more like a monkey playing dress-up in civilized clothing."

Charlie remained unaffected, his joy unwavering.

"I've only just begun my studies. In a month's time, you'll witness an entirely different version of me. Oh, by the way, this is Monsieur Charlie Collent. He is currently enjoying a sumptuous dinner worth 8 verl d'or!"

At this point, Charlie glanced at Jenna, who stood beside the bed. He opened his mouth as if he had something to say, yet hesitated to do so in her presence.

Nonchalantly, Lumian inquired, "What's the matter? Just speak your mind."

Charlie lowered his voice.

"Did you hear? Last night, 'Black Scorpion' Roger, 'Baldy' Harman, and 'Short-legged Candlestick' Castina were all killed."

"I'm aware. And?" Lumian believed Charlie wouldn't seek him out for something that would soon become public knowledge.

Charlie glanced at Jenna and continued, "What has been confirmed is that the murderer belongs to a terrorist organization known as the Aurora Order. They have a penchant for gruesome displays of carnage and primarily target individuals who worship evil gods. In this case, 'Black Scorpion' Roger and his cohorts followed an evil god named the Great Mother."

Aurora Order? Lumian was taken aback.

Where did this scapegoat come from?

Why were the official Beyonders suddenly pointing fingers at the Aurora Order?

Shouldn't they first investigate those who had conflicts with "Black Scorpion" Roger and the Poison Spur Gang? That's how detective novels were written!

"Are you saying that the Aurora Order truly carried out these murders?" Jenna inquired curiously.

Charlie nodded emphatically.

"That's correct. The Aurora Order appears to have claimed responsibility for these acts in some capacity. Tomorrow, there should be reports about the case in certain newspapers."

The latter half of Charlie's statement suggested that the information he had just shared was meant to be disclosed and held no confidentiality clauses.

The Aurora Order claiming responsibility? They weren't even involved. Why would they assume responsibility? Lumian found himself momentarily perplexed yet slightly amused.

If he hadn't personally slain "Black Scorpion" Roger, he might have suspected the Aurora Order as the culprits.

Charlie glanced at Lumian and added in a hushed tone, "This afternoon, once the election concludes, a crackdown on the mobs in the entire market district shall commence in response to the public's concerns about the district's security."

Are you reading from a document? Your words sound so official. Lumian realized why Charlie had rushed to inform him.

It was best for those with dirt on them to leave the market district this afternoon and hide for the time being!

Lumian nodded subtly and replied, "I have a mysticism gathering to attend this afternoon."

Although Mr. K's gathering was scheduled for 9 p.m., Lumian intended to arrive early.

Charlie breathed a sigh of relief and gestured toward the door.

"I'll make a move first."

After a moment of contemplation, Lumian responded, "In the future, there's no need to inform me about such trivial matters."

He added mockingly, "Do you doubt my abilities?"

Charlie sheepishly smiled.

"It's my first time, so I couldn't help but feel a bit emotional. Don't worry, unless it truly concerns you, I won't drop any more hints."

As Lumian watched Charlie depart, Jenna clicked her tongue and sighed.

"He's turned into your spy among the official Beyonders."

"I'd prefer it if he wasn't," Lumian mumbled, pursing his lips. "He's just an imbecile, bound to mess things up."

Jenna scoffed and waved her hand.

"I'm going to find Franca. Are you planning to share the information Charlie gave us with the others?"

Lumian shook his head.

“If everyone flees, the official Beyonders will undoubtedly investigate any leaks. That imbecile won’t be able to escape.

“Besides, some people deserve to end up in jail.”

And you don’t? Jenna criticized as she left Room 207 and stepped into the corridor.

At that moment, the two cleaning ladies had already reached the staircase.

Jenna hurried over, her gaze sweeping across the cleaning lady named Elodie, who wore a blond wig.

Suddenly, Jenna’s expression froze, and she swiftly turned around, heading back to Room 207. Lumian, who was about to leave, found it peculiar.

Elodie, a woman of almost 50 years with a blond wig and eye shadow, also noticed Jenna. She stared at the apprentice actress’s retreating figure for a few seconds before calling out in confusion and concern, “Celia…”

Jenna’s body went rigid.

She slowly turned back, forcing a smile, and greeted Elodie with a loud voice, “Mother.”

Mother? Lumian almost couldn’t believe his ears.

Then he recalled Elodie mentioning that she used to be a theater actress and now enjoyed watching performances at the Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. Her husband had passed away a few years ago in a factory accident, leaving behind two nearly adult children who helped support the family.

Jenna, on the other hand, was an apprentice actress at the same theater. Her father had also passed away a few years ago, leaving only her mother and brother. Her plan was to earn enough money for her tuition fees and other expenses for the coming year.

It all adds up… Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

Elodie approached Jenna with a broom, assessing her appearance.

“Why are you here? And what kind of makeup is that?”

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Chapter 231 - 231 Mr. K's Purpose

231 Mr. K's Purpose

Jenna's eyes darted around, her arm raised in the air.

"This is a requirement for my theater acting class!"

Her words seemed to ease her tension, and her smile took on a more natural quality.

"Didn't I mention that I work part-time as a waitress at a bar to make ends meet? This is my boss. I'm here to discuss a salary increase with him!"

Jenna pointed confidently at Lumian, stationed by the door of Room 207.

Elodie glanced at Lumian, then fixed her gaze on Jenna for a few moments before nodding. "Don't forget to come home tonight."

Jenna's smile faltered momentarily before she replied, "Okay."

Seeing Elodie return to her tasks, cleaning the other side of the second floor, Jenna tiptoed down the stairs and made her way out of Auberge du Coq Doré.

It didn't take long for her to spot Lumian catching up to her, prompting her to grumble, "Dammit! Why is my mother at Auberge du Coq Doré?"

Lumian contemplated for a moment before responding. "Blame it on Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. Monsieur Ive, the owner of Auberge du Coq Doré, found a part-time cleaning lady who works only half a day there. And your mother is a regular visitor at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons for plays."

Jenna clenched her teeth and exclaimed, "Those cursed heretics!"

She then threw up her arm.

"Tonight, I'll tell her the truth. I'll say I'm working part-time as an underground singer to save up for next year's tuition, and I earn quite a bit!"

Lumian glanced at Jenna's side profile, curious. "You don't seem too nervous or afraid?"

Jenna spat.

"That's my mother, not some man-eating monster.

“She’s kind-hearted and understanding. I didn’t tell her what I was up to before because I didn’t want her to worry.”

“She’ll worry now, though,” Lumian reminded her.

Being an underground singer in dance halls and bars often involved dealing with shady characters. Being taken advantage of was an unfortunate reality from time to time.

Jenna’s smile was mischievous as she playfully remarked, “I’m the mistress of Ciel Dubois, leader of the Savoie Mob and guardian of Salle de Bal Brise. Who dares to mess with me?”

Lumian chuckled. “That’s even more dangerous.”

Jenna averted her gaze and observed the street vendors on Rue Anarchie.

“If my mother can’t accept it, I plan to demonstrate my current abilities and convince her that I can protect myself.”

Oh, really? Lumian didn’t raise the example of the perverted Hedsey.

Jenna composed herself and said in a heavy voice, “She’s been through so much. She has worked tirelessly for years. I want to help her shoulder some of the burden so she won’t break herself.”

Lumian contemplated for a moment before responding. “Since your father’s passing?”

Jenna’s gaze shifted to the ground, and she tersely confirmed, “There was an accident at the factory. My father was severely injured and spent over ten days in the hospital. In the end, he couldn’t be saved.”

“We used up all our savings and still owe a significant amount of money. A few years ago, I could have pursued a career in theater and studied acting. But it wasn’t until the beginning of this year that we managed to repay almost half of our debt and save up some money for my education. My mother insisted that we couldn’t delay any longer. If we kept delaying, I would become too old.”

Lumian listened attentively, his brow furrowing in puzzlement. “No compensation for the factory accident?”

“Yes, but that scoundrel hasn’t compensated us yet!” Jenna clenched her teeth. “He keeps appealing, and the courts always take their time. F*cking dammit, is he trying to drag it out until we’re all dead?”

Lumian fell silent briefly before changing the subject. “Was your mother truly a theater actress?”

“That’s correct.” Jenna’s expression softened gradually. “She had great acting skills and was beautiful, but most theater managers, sponsors, and owners were men. They would prey on actresses in the theater like lions patrolling their territory. Those who refused to submit to them wouldn’t get good roles. It’s infuriating, everyone thinks it’s normal, even the police and the courts!

“My mother has a gentle nature, but she’s fiercely stubborn. She could only land supporting roles and was even fired once. When the theater she worked at went bankrupt, she lost the chance to return to the stage temporarily. She had to take on odd jobs as a motel maid and laundry worker.

“That’s when she met my father. They got together and became husband and wife in the presence of God. Praise the Sun. At that time, my father was working hard to become a skilled laborer. My mother took on various jobs and saved money while searching for an opportunity to return to the theater. Those were the days she cherished the most.

“Later, my brother and I were born. Mom and Dad became busier, struggling to make ends meet and give us a chance to pursue an education.

“When we became self-sufficient, my mother was already old and couldn’t return to the stage. She placed her hopes on me. She wanted to see me become an exceptional actress, even if it meant playing supporting roles. My father wished for my brother to become a skilled laborer.”

These words had been bottled up inside Jenna’s heart for a long time, and only now did she find the opportunity to express them.

Lumian patiently waited for Jenna to finish before posing a question. “Do you aspire to be a theater actress yourself?”

Jenna beamed with pride and contentment. “It’s hard not to love theater when your mother is such a dedicated fan and talented actress.”

Her smile inexplicably evoked a twinge of jealousy in Lumian.

Sighing with a touch of emotion, he remarked, “I can tell that your mother has a genuine passion for theater. Even as a cleaning lady, she adorns herself with makeup and wears exquisite wigs.”

Jenna lightly nodded and shared, “She says it makes her feel youthful, as if she’s back on the stage. In her eyes, she remains a true theater actress, and her other jobs are merely part-time endeavors.

“She’s always been like this. She takes me to witness the sunrise, reminding me that darkness will always give way to light. And she tells me that even in the darkest times, I must find a way to kindle my own inner light. Only then can I patiently await the sunrise.”

Jenna’s yearning for the future grew palpable.

“If I continue as an underground singer for another year, I’ll save enough for next year’s tuition and make significant progress in repaying our debts. With the combined earnings of my mother and brother, we won’t be burdened anymore. Soon, she won’t have to juggle multiple jobs, and my brother will have the opportunity to learn skills from others!”

As Jenna spoke, her excitement grew, and she couldn’t help but raise her arm, as if reaching out to grasp the beauty of the future

Lumian observed Jenna silently, and a wave of pent-up emotions within him seemed to dissipate.

Hope. Such a profound and moving word.

After a few moments of relief, Jenna suddenly felt an inexplicable sense of embarrassment. She turned her head and gave Lumian an accusing glare.

“Why are you staring at me? Haven’t you seen someone getting excited before?”

Lumian scoffed but chose not to respond.

Jenna studied him intently and muttered to herself, “Why do I feel like you’re in better spirits?”

“No,” Lumian replied succinctly.

At that moment, the two of them had already entered Avenue du Marché. Posters celebrating Hugues Artois’s successful election as a member of parliament adorned the surroundings.

Hugues Artois, the joint support of the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob, has indeed become a member of parliament… I wonder what changes he will bring to the market district… Lumian averted his gaze from the poster, his mind echoing Franca’s words: Lady Moon, a follower of the Great Mother, believed that Hugues Artois was an open-minded individual.

…

In the afternoon, prior to embarking on his journey to Avenue du Boulevard in search of Mr. K, Lumian arranged an altar in the second-floor bedroom of Salle de Bal Brise.

With the wall of spirituality in place, Lumian proceeded to light three candles in the order from deity to mankind, left to right. After carefully dripping essential oils and extracts, he took a couple of steps back, enveloped in a misty atmosphere, and intoned in a deep voice,”The Fool that doesn’t belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.”

A faint gray fog arose, accompanied by an unsettling aura.

Suppressing the sluggishness of his thoughts and the tingling sensation beneath his skin, Lumian fixed his gaze upon the bluish-black flame of the candle. Following the instructions of Madam Magician, he recited the subsequent incantation in the ancient language of Hermes.

“I implore you, I implore your protection…”

After a series of gestures, Lumian caught sight of the divine angel, seemingly materialized from pure light.

Simultaneously, he faintly heard a dreamy sigh.

A sigh originating from an infinite height.

Descending from above in resplendent and ethereal form, the angel extended its arms to embrace Lumian.

Wings of radiant light enveloped him.

When Lumian regained consciousness, everything had returned to its usual state.

…

As evening descended upon 19 Rue Scheer, Avenue du Boulevard, Lumian once again found himself in the basement, face-to-face with Mr. K.

Clad in his customary voluminous hood and black robe, Mr. K sat silently upon a chair with a crimson backrest.

Meeting Lumian’s gaze, Mr. K nodded gently and spoke in a low, raspy voice, “I am highly pleased with your adeptness in action. What’s more, unknowingly, your actions align with the teachings of my lord, countering those Blessed of evil beings!”

Pausing momentarily, Mr. K inquired, “Have you given it sufficient thought?”

“Yes, I have,” Lumian replied, lowering his head. “You have revealed to me the magnificence of the Lord.”

“Haha!” Mr. K burst into a maniacal laughter, as if his sanity had slipped away.

After a few seconds, he regained composure and disregarded the attendants, ensuring they stayed put. He continued, “My lord’s honorific name is the Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God, the Lord who reigns behind the curtain of shadows, the ruler of the mind world, and the degenerated nature of all living things. Choose any three and entreat Him in Hermes.”

The mere description by Mr. K caused Lumian’s garments, skin, flesh, and bones to dissolve completely, leaving behind an unnerving sensation of pure consciousness and self-awareness.

Involuntarily trembling, Lumian instinctively recited, “The Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God, the Lord who reigns behind the curtain of shadows…”

Lumian’s mind was too overwhelmed to deliberate, and he unconsciously selected the first three phrases.

Almost instantly, his surroundings darkened, as if enshrouded by a heavy curtain.

Beyond the illusory and profound shadowed veil, a pair of eyes fixated upon Lumian, penetrating his consciousness and nearly rendering him unconscious.

After an indeterminate period, Lumian regained his faculties, his body drenched in cold sweat.

Rising from his seat, Mr. K’s deep voice seemed laced with a smile.

“Henceforth, you are our brother, truly one of us.

“We’re a secret organization that believes in the True Creator. We go by the name of the Aurora Order.”

“Aurora Order?” Lumian was taken aback.

Isn’t this the terrorist organization that took the blame for me?

It seems that the official Beyonders did not misidentify their target…

I have truly become a member of the Aurora Order…

Dismissing the attendants from the basement, Mr. K addressed Lumian, “Gardner Martin is a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. This secret organization once revered our lord, but in recent years, they have distanced themselves from us and ceased their frequent prayers. They appear to be plotting something of great significance.

“I have assigned you to infiltrate their ranks, for I hope you can discover the cause behind their actions and unravel their intentions.”

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Chapter 232 - 232 Financing of Activities

232 Financing of Activities

The Iron and Blood Cross Order… appears to have some significant plans in the works… Lumian finally grasped Mr. K's true intentions for persuading him to join a mob.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order—an equally secretive organization—seemed to be related to a competition of faith and Trier's situation.

Curiosity stirring within him, Lumian inquired, "What exactly is the Iron and Blood Cross Order?"

The more Lumian understood, the more he inclined towards actions that would gain Gardner Martin's approval.

Mr. K let out a chuckle. "Allow Gardner Martin to personally enlighten you. If you possess knowledge about their circumstances before they disclose it to you, they are likely to notice some problem."

So, you found a wanted, simple country boy like me to be a spy? You wanted someone with a clean slate and humble background? Lumian pondered, nodding thoughtfully.

His thoughts wandered to the mysterious item Gardner Martin had smuggled into Trier through Rat Christo, as well as the support the Savoie Mob extended to Hugues Artois. After two seconds of contemplation, Lumian voiced his suspicion, "Could the Iron and Blood Cross Order's plan be connected to Hugues Artois?"

In a raspy voice, Mr. K responded, "According to the information we've gathered, that is merely one component, not the primary one."

I see… Lumian then broached the topic of "mirror people" before continuing, "Gardner Martin seemed aware that the item he had the smuggling caravan transport could trigger a corresponding incident."

Mr. K fell silent momentarily before speaking, "I suspect that item holds immense importance. It's a matter you'll need to unravel. Don't worry. Our Aurora Order is generous with rewards. When the time comes, you can make any request."

Just as Lumian was about to internally utter the words, "Help me revive my sister," Mr. K added, "As long as it lies within my power."

Very straightforward… If I genuinely become an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and gain access to pertinent information, they will undoubtedly grant me certain privileges. And in turn, I can seek rewards from the Aurora Order. Yes… This is akin to further fulfilling Madam Magician's mission. She won't reject me, the bearer of a Minor Arcana card… Such "treatment" is rare—to receive three rewards for a single task… As Lumian silently sighed, he assumed it wouldn't matter if he faced rejection.

"I now require some financing for my future endeavors."

The purpose of these funds was to enhance Lumian's personal strength and establish a "solid foundation" for completing the mission.

Mr. K nodded. "No problem. I will provide you with 10,000 verl d'or later. This is one of the perks of officially joining our Aurora Order and participating in a high-risk mission."

In Intis, "perk" was a commonly used term coined by Emperor Roselle.

Very generous… At that moment, he found himself wondering if he should seek out more secret organizations like this one, just to enjoy additional membership perks.

Rising from his seat, Mr. K extended his hands and began to circle Lumian slowly.

As he walked, he spoke in a solemn tone, "My Lord is the great being who created this world, the father of all living creatures."

"We all originate from Him, carrying the divine essence He bestowed upon us."

"Divinity exists within every living being, and no one is inherently more noble than another. We distinguish our status based on our proximity to our Lord and our ability to embrace His teachings."

"It is through our shared divinity that we can consume potions, face trials, and accumulate more divine power. Ultimately, we can become angels in service to my Lord…"

Is he preaching? Lumian couldn't help but feel that there were similarities between Mr. K's words and Madam Magician's story of the original Creator—the Oldest One—fragmenting and manifesting different Beyonder characteristics. They seemed to share a common essence.

This led him to suspect that the True Creator of the Aurora Order corresponded to the Oldest One.

After nearly fifteen minutes, Mr. K concluded his preaching and traced a cross on his chest, starting from the top and moving to the bottom, left, and right.

“Praise be to you, the creator of all things. Praise be to you, who carries the burdens of the world’s sins.”

Lumian followed suit, offering his own words of praise.

Mr. K then proceeded to introduce the Aurora Order.

“We currently have a total of seven Saints and twenty-two Oracles, each designated by alphabetical code names, scattered across various locations…”

There are still 21 individuals as powerful as Mr. K? The Saints are Sequence 4 and Sequence 3 demigods with godhood. And there are a total of seven in the Aurora Order? Lumian was taken aback by this revelation.

The Aurora Order was far more formidable than he had anticipated!

As for whether there were any figures on the level of angels, Mr. K did not mention it, leaving Lumian to wonder.

Concluding the introduction, Mr. K took hold of his right index finger with his left hand and tore it off. He then tossed it to Lumian, the finger dripping with blood.

“Use it in times of dire need.”

Lumian caught the finger, its blood already congealing, and imagined the phantom pain he had experienced before.

Although he was unafraid of pain or injuries in battle and could stab himself without hesitation when necessary, he couldn’t simply pluck out a finger without reason, as Mr. K had done.

In a matter of moments, a new finger sprouted from Mr. K’s hand, its skin fair and unblemished.

With the gathering scheduled for 9 p.m., Lumian secured the 10,000 verl d’or and made his way to Psychic’s old journal library, a lavish off-white six-story building located at 19 Rue Scheer. He stayed there until 6 p.m.

Then, he leisurely found a nearby restaurant and spent 2 verl d’or on an inexpensive set meal.

The meal included an ordinary bottle of red wine, a bowl of soup, three dishes, a dessert, and an unlimited supply of bread.

Lumian made his selections from the provided menu, opting for a beef chowder, braised rabbit meat, and a serving of roasted cauliflower.

As the gathering commenced, Lumian, already in possession of the Scorpion Poison, sold the aquatic monster’s blood, poisonous scales, and other items he had no use for, fetching him 100 verl d’or.

Thus far, he had amassed a total of 14,710 verl d'or and 24 coppet in cash, mostly courtesy of Mr. K.

This filled him with confidence that he could gather the remaining 30,000 verl d'or within a short span of time.

If he borrowed a bit here and pocketed a bit there, combined with the spoils of war, wouldn't he have enough?

Shortly before 11 p.m., Lumian returned to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Ruhr and Michel, residents of the third floor who made a living selling photos of street ma?tresse d'atelier near the Suhit steam locomotive station, were hauling a bulging flaxen-colored cloth bag up the stairs.

Lumian cast a curious glance at the white-haired duo and asked, slightly puzzled, "So late?"

He knew that Ruhr and Michel also worked as part-time scavengers, having encountered them on a few occasions before. However, he recalled that their work typically ended by nine.

Ruhr, clad in tattered clothing with a slight hunch to his back, mustered a smile and replied with a touch of joy, "Tonight, the member of parliament's office hosted a celebratory feast and discarded a lot of valuable rubbish. We waited until the bags could no longer hold before returning."

The market district's member of parliament's office was celebrating Hugues Artois's election? Lumian nodded subtly and walked past the elderly couple, making his way to Room 207.

Before igniting the carbide lamp, he noticed a square-folded white paper on the table, illuminated by the faint crimson moonlight streaming through the window.

Observing the neatly folded paper, Lumian suspected it to be a letter from Madam Magician.

The Pyromaniac potion formula? Did she have the messenger leave the Pyromaniac potion formula here before my arrival? Is she so confident in my ability to become an official member of the Aurora Order? Or does she have something else to inform me about? These thoughts raced through Lumian's mind as he ignited the carbide lamp, picked up the white paper, and carefully unfolded it.

"Your next mission is to complete the task assigned by Mr. K. Do you understand what I mean?

"Pyromaniac potion formula:

"Main ingredient: Fire Salamander gland, Magma Elf core;

“Supplementary ingredients: 50 milliliters of Fire Salamander blood, 10 grams of Magma Pyroxene powder, 10 grams of Redcrown Balsam powder, 10 drops of Sun Star extract.

“Usage: What do you think?”

She actually wrote down the main ingredient… Does this mean I’ll need the accompanying parts for the potion? Is Madam Magician also interested in uncovering the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s current situation? How did she know that today would be the day Mr. K would assign me this task? Or does she simply disregard Mr. K’s intentions? Does she only hope that I can gain more of Mr. K’s trust and gradually become a core member of the Aurora Order? Lumian leaned towards the first possibility, but he couldn’t dismiss the latter.

For now, he had no choice but to follow her instructions.

Having attended two mysticism gatherings, Lumian had developed a certain understanding of the potion formula’s value. He knew that the Pyromaniac potion formula in his possession was worth at least 30,000 verl d’or.

If he were to sell it, he could exchange it for the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.

Of course, this idea was fleeting. Without Madam Magician’s explicit agreement, he didn’t dare entertain it.

Wouldn’t it be equivalent to trading Madam Magician’s potion formula for her Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic?

Instead, Lumian found a more feasible plan, inspired by a popular trade scheme in Intis which was also known as Commercial Paradise or Financial Empire.

The plan required a down payment of 10,000 verl d’or, with the remaining 20,000 to be paid in installments over a year, along with a 10 to 15% interest.

After careful consideration, Lumian, sensing a high likelihood of Madam Magician possessing godhood, dismissed the idea.

He had already gathered almost half of the required funds. There was no need to risk offending a demigod by negotiating installments.

Even if Harvest Sacrifice didn’t yield a satisfactory price or Franca had little savings due to her extravagant lifestyle, Salle de Bal Brise still had a substantial amount of cash in its safe. As the protector of the dance hall, what harm would there be in embezzling a small sum?

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Chapter 233 - 233 Advance Payment

233 Advance Payment

Realizing the lateness of the hour, Lumian planned on delving into Aurore's grimoire until midnight. He resolved to seek out Franca the next morning and inquire about the sale of Harvest Sacrifice. Additionally, he intended to ask her to keep a watchful eye on the supplementary ingredients like Fire Salamander blood and Magma Pyroxene powder.

Hmm, Franca is known for her late sleeping habits. If I go searching for her now, she'll surely still be awake. Most likely, she'll be asleep before 11 a.m. tomorrow… Taking this into consideration, Lumian had a change of heart. He tidied the wooden table, rose from his seat, and departed from Auberge du Coq Doré.

3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in front of Apartment 601.

After knocking a few times, Lumian caught sight of Franca. Her flaxen locks were disheveled, and she wore a lake-blue silk nightgown as she opened the door.

"What's the matter this time?" the Witch inquired, a smile gracing her lips as she stepped aside to make way.

Lumian didn't respond immediately. He glanced around and inquired, "Is Jenna not here?"

Unconsciously, Franca's smile faded away.

"Are you here for her? She doesn't have to perform tonight. She left early today."

Lumian nodded.

"That's good. I won't have to climb the outer wall and leave later then."

"…" Franca's lips twitched, and she clicked her tongue with a chuckle. "So, you've come to mock me?"

After playing a simple prank, Lumian settled himself on the gray divan.

Just as he was about to speak, Franca, who had curled up in the recliner, causing her nightgown's hem to slip, let out a soft chuckle.

"You missed quite a show in the market district this afternoon.

“The police took care of all the places tied to the mob. Brignais, Simon, Christo, and Black were all apprehended and brought to the police headquarters. They nearly fell into the clutches of the official Beyonders and received their customary treatment. Luckily, Gardner managed to contact the newly elected Hugues Artois and convinced him to exert pressure on the two Churches and the police headquarters. By throwing a few scapegoats under the bus, the matter was resolved.”

Hugues Artois is indeed in cahoots with the Boss… Lumian chuckled.

“You didn’t get caught?”

“I didn’t go to any of those locations today. I spent the whole afternoon playing Fighting Evil with Jenna and my star dancer. Why would I get caught? You see, there’s nothing wrong with being lazy. My favorite saying is that lazy people are blessed by being lazy,” Franca replied, amused.

“I’ve never heard that before,” Lumian asked casually. “Where does this proverb come from?”

“I made it up,” Franca replied nonchalantly.

Pondering Franca’s explanation, Lumian’s suspicions were confirmed.

“Did Jenna suggest staying indoors in the afternoon and playing cards?”

“How did you know?” Franca exclaimed in surprise.

She scrutinized Lumian, her gaze turning suspicious.

Could it be that Jenna told him herself? Had they shared so much in private?

Lumian had nothing to hide and spoke frankly, “Charlie paid me a visit today, and Jenna happened to be there. From him, I learned that the official Beyonders and the police headquarters planned a joint operation to clean up the mobsters in the market district this afternoon.

“I advised Jenna to keep it a secret so as not to trouble Charlie. And it seems she’s proven to be trustworthy. She simply kept you occupied in the apartment,” Lumian explained.

Franca’s face brightened with understanding. “No wonder you weren’t around in the afternoon.”

A smug expression crossed her features. “Jenna is still on my side!”

She let out a satisfied sigh before curiosity tinged her voice as Franca asked warily, “Why did Jenna come to you?”

Lumian smiled knowingly. “After the demise of ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger, she finds me suspicious due to my ongoing conflict with the Poison Spur Mob.”

Franca’s response was a mix of relief and amusement.

“The Aurora Order ended up being the scapegoat in this case.”

“Since I arrived in Trier, I’ve noticed in the newspapers that whenever something happened, the terrorist group known as the Aurora Order would claim responsibility. But I never imagined that we would finally get a taste of that treatment. The subsequent investigations were misled, and no one suspected us.”

The Aurora Order is indeed responsible for this… After Lumian mocked Franca, he steered the conversation back on track.

“Taking advantage of the situation, I attended a mysticism gathering in the afternoon and managed to obtain the formula for the Pyromaniac potion, as well as some clues about its main ingredient.”

“You’re quite fortunate,” Franca exclaimed, her eyes widening slightly. “If we weren’t in Intis, I’d doubt your story. It’s only in Intis that the Pyromaniac potion formula is so readily available.”

Lumian then made a request.

“Please help me keep an eye on the supplementary ingredients: Fire Salamander’s blood, Magma Pyroxene powder, and Redcrown Balsam.”

He omitted mentioning Sun Star, as it was relatively common and could be found in larger flower shops.

“No problem,” Franca assured him. She inquired about the quantities of each ingredient in detail before raising another concern. “Do you have enough money? I mean, enough to purchase the main ingredient for the potion.”

From her perspective, Lumian had likely spent all his savings on the Pyromaniac potion formula.

Lumian seized the opportunity to respond, “Actually, I was just about to ask if Harvest Sacrifice had been sold.”

“How can it be sold so soon? It’s only been a day! I haven’t even had the chance to attend any mysticism gatherings,” Franca replied, pausing before offering a solution. “If you urgently need money, I can lend you some. After all, I don’t have any immediate need for the next potion.”

“There’s no rush,” Lumian replied after considering the matter.

He still needed to gather all the supplementary ingredients.

Franca estimated, “Based on my experience, Harvest Sacrifice won’t fetch a high price due to its inevitable side effects. You can expect it to sell for around 10,000 to 12,000 verl d’or.”

“When you need the money, I can directly provide you with 6,000 verl d’or, considering it a buyout of Harvest Sacrifice. Additionally, I can lend you 20,000 to 30,000 verl d’or, but you must return it within three months.”

“Alright,” Lumian agreed without hesitation.

He then produced Fallen Mercury and said to Franca, “I need to find someone who can repair Beyonder weapons.”

Franca examined the dirk with its ominous patterns and asked in confusion, “What’s the point of repairing a Beyonder weapon? Its energy will deplete eventually.”

“It’s tremendously useful. I want to utilize it for as long as possible,” Lumian admitted, though he naturally refrained from mentioning that he had a means to replenish Fallen Mercury’s energy.

Of course, he had to wait until he reached Sequence 6 and could withstand the corruption. Otherwise, Termiboros would undoubtedly seize the opportunity to cause trouble.

“That’s true,” Franca recalled Fallen Mercury’s impressive performance in the battle against “Black Scorpion” Roger. “I’ll help you inquire, but no Artisan would likely accept the task of repairing a suspected corrupted Beyonder weapon. They fear the potential adverse effects it could have on them.”

Artisan… a Beyonder skilled in repairing mystical items and Beyonder weapons? After exchanging a few more words with Franca, Lumian left Room 601 and returned to Avenue du Marché, entering Salle de Bal Brise.

Despite it almost being midnight, the place was still bustling. Lumian made his way to the finance office on the second floor corridor. As he unlocked the safe, he asked about the accountant and the cashier on the night shift.

“How much cash do we have at the moment?”

The accountant, a refined bespectacled woman in her thirties, replied with a hint of apprehension, “Approximately 28,000 verl d’or and some change.”

Lumian had already opened the safe’s door by then, revealing stacks of banknotes and shimmering golden coins.

After a quick calculation, he calmly requested, “Give me 12,000 verl d’or.”

“Huh?” Both the accountant and the cashier exclaimed fearfully.

While Monsieur Ciel was the protector of Salle de Bal Brise, taking away such a substantial amount of cash in one go was unthinkable!

The accountant exchanged a glance with the young cashier, silently indicating her to find the dance hall manager, René, in the adjacent office.

Dressed in formal attire, Gardner Martin's designated representative glanced at the open safe and inquired, "Monsieur Ciel, why do you need to withdraw 12,000 verl d'or?"

"Personal expenses," Lumian replied calmly.

René pondered for a few seconds before responding, "No problem.

"In the first two years, Baron Brignais would take between 40,000 and 50,000 verl d'or from the dance hall annually. During the transition, he even withdrew 15,000 verl d'or, which would have counted as part of the first half of the year. And it's not even the second half yet. Monsieur Ciel, consider this 12,000 verl d'or an advance."

"Sure." Lumian didn't concern himself with the details; he simply wanted the 12,000 verl d'or!

After securing the cash in a cloth bag, Lumian let out a silent sigh of relief.

He had nearly gathered the required 30,000 verl d'or to purchase the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic. Now, all he had to do was await news of the supplementary ingredients!

Currently, he possessed a total of 26,710 verl d'or. With an additional 6,000 from the Harvest Sacrifice, he would have enough.

As Lumian, laden with a significant amount of cash, left Salle de Bal Brise, a sense of unease suddenly washed over him.

He wasn't afraid of being robbed; rather, he worried that a conflict might damage the money bag or tear the banknotes.

I must find a safe place for it. I can't keep carrying it like this… Lumian strolled along Avenue du Marché, contemplating transferring the funds to the safe house.

Before long, his eyes caught sight of the brightly illuminated office belonging to the market district's member of parliament.

It stood as a classic four-story building, boasting a khaki-colored fa?ade with statues adorning the top two floors—a Sunbird and Giant Gears.

The celebration banquet is still underway… Lumian shook his head disapprovingly.

Pausing for a moment, he settled in the shadows across the street, observing the departing guests from the banquet hall.

Hugues Artois, who enjoyed the combined support of the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob, not to mention Lady Moon's praise, was undoubtedly a man of influence. Some of the guests he had invited could very well be problematic individuals connected to the schemes of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

As time went by, an increasing number of guests emerged from the member of parliament's office. Lumian found no one who aroused suspicion. He could only confirm that most of them belonged to the upper echelons of society. They were elegantly attired, and their faces had graced the pages of various newspapers.

Suddenly, a familiar figure caught his eye.

It was Gardner Martin, an amiable man with chubby cheeks, a few silver strands of hair at his temples, and brownish-red eyes!

Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob!

Dressed in a tailcoat and a dark bow tie, Gardner seemed to sense something. He abruptly turned his head, fixing his gaze on the shadowy spot where Lumian sat.

Lumian's heart skipped a beat.

His thoughts raced, and he swiftly made up his mind. Rising to his feet, he approached Gardner Martin.

Gardner Martin regarded him with a penetrating stare, revealing no trace of emotion.

"Good evening, Boss," Lumian greeted as he drew nearer.

Gardner Martin asked nonchalantly, "What brings you here?"

Lumian replied candidly, "I left Salle de Bal Brise and noticed that the member of parliament's office banquet was still ongoing. I thought I'd check which guests Monsieur Hugues Artois had invited, so as to avoid offending the wrong people in the future."

Gardner Martin nodded subtly and spoke calmly, "That's a commendable habit."

With a gesture signaling Lumian to depart, he proceeded towards a private carriage, accompanied by Butler Faustino.

Lumian's heart stirred as he followed suit, taking the initiative to speak, "Boss, I took an advance of 12,000 verl d'or from the dance hall today."

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Chapter 234 - 234 Sincerity

234 Sincerity

Gardner Martin's brows lifted in surprise as he cast a curious glance at Lumian, taking a moment to ponder the situation.

"Let's converse inside the carriage."

Upon hearing this, Butler Faustino took the initiative to settle himself in the front of the carriage, right beside the driver.

Silently, Lumian trailed behind Gardner Martin and entered the carriage, taking a seat opposite him.

As the carriage slowly set in motion, Gardner Martin fixed his gaze upon Lumian and spoke up.

"Why did you advance such a hefty sum of cash?"

Lumian responded with candor.

"Given the opportunity to enhance my strength, I aspire to become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac."

Gardner Martin hadn't anticipated Lumian's straightforwardness. After a brief pause, he smiled and inquired, "Is 12,000 verl d'or sufficient?"

Lumian didn't bat an eye as he replied, "In addition to the 18,000 verl d'or you provided last time and my previous savings."

Gardner Martin nodded slowly.

"Did you come across anyone selling the main ingredient for the Pyromaniac potion elsewhere? And do you possess the formula for the potion?"

"Yes," Lumian confessed without reservation.

Gardner Martin chuckled.

"You've divulged all of this to me. Shouldn't these matters be kept secret?"

Lumian displayed an unusual sincerity as he responded, "I feel prepared to consume the Pyromaniac potion. It won't be long before I advance to Sequence 7.

“When that happens, if a conflict arises, concealing the change in my strength would be impossible. Boss, you’ll soon discover it anyway. So why not tell you now?”

Furthermore, René, the manager of the dance hall, worked under Gardner Martin. He would undoubtedly report the 12,000 verl d’or advancement.

Lumian paused momentarily before continuing, “That’s one reason.

“Another reason is that I’ve lived on the streets, endured rural life, and faced persecution. Now, I adhere to a single principle: I treat those who treat me well.”

He wasn’t attempting to flaunt his loyalty. According to Jenna, such exaggerated loyalty would seem untrustworthy, especially when he had only met Gardner Martin once. His main goal was to convey his allegiance.

Similarly, Gardner Martin would definitely comprehend the underlying purpose behind Lumian’s frankness. It was a display of his astuteness.

Gardner Martin lifted his head and burst into laughter.

“Very good.

“Brignais, Christo, and the others have their own secrets. They assume I’m oblivious.

“The fact that you can accurately grasp your situation, your future progress, and my stance indicates that you’re more astute than them. Most times, sincerity proves to be the most effective approach.”

Sincerity? Lumian seized the opportunity to express himself with an extraordinary sincerity.

“Boss, I have leads on the main ingredient, but I’m unsure where to acquire the supplementary ingredients.

“Could you keep an eye out for Fire Salamander’s blood, Magma Pyroxene powder, and Redcrown Balsam?”

From Lumian’s perspective, Gardner Martin, suspected to be a Sequence 6 or perhaps even a Sequence 5 Beyonder of the Hunter pathway, would have an easier time finding the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion compared to Franca.

Perhaps he still possessed leftover supplementary ingredients from advancing to Pyromaniac?

According to Aurore’s grimoire, spiritual supplementary ingredients could be preserved for an extended period if the method was correct.

Gardner Martin was taken aback. He hadn't anticipated Ciel making such a direct request.

Initially, he had intended to inquire about a few matters of concern and understand Lumian's needs before offering assistance to win him over.

After a brief pause, Gardner Martin nodded and responded, "No problem."

Observing that Gardner Martin didn't inquire about the quantities of the three supplementary ingredients, Lumian grew increasingly convinced that the Savoie Mob boss was a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway.

Gardner Martin peered out of the window and spoke inquisitively.

"While you were observing the parliament member's office, did you notice anything suspicious?"

"No," Lumian shook his head. "They're just individuals whose pictures occasionally appear in the newspapers."

Gardner Martin smiled nonchalantly.

"Indeed, there's the president and vice-president of our Savoie Chamber of Commerce; Bono Goodville, the owner of Goodville Chemical Factory; Clement, the manager of Nova Mechanical Prosthetics; and Etienne from Saint-Ger Phlogiston Factory… I was invited as a shareholder of Rist Docks and the head of Rist Shipping Company and Savoie Construction Company, not as the boss of the Savoie Mob."

Gardner Martin let out a soft sigh.

"However, we can barely squeeze into Trier's high society. In the business world, the true heavyweights are the chairmen and proprietors of Trier Bank, Suchit Bank, and Asset Credit Bank. They are the shareholders of behemoths like Suhit Textile Group, Tilisi Coal and Steel Consortium, Anubi Steel Company, Southern Liquor Merchants Federation, Falgar Weapons Group, and Balam-Paz Import and Export Corporation."

Lumian had come across these names in newspapers and magazines. The company that had left the deepest impression was Balam-Paz Import and Export Corporation.

To protect their interests in the West Balam and Paz Valley of the Southern Continent, they had even been allowed to finance a substantial private army and a fleet as mercenaries.

Noticing that the carriage was about to depart from Avenue du Marché, Gardner Martin signaled the driver to halt and nodded at Lumian.

“Before consuming the potion, ensure your condition is favorable. It’s better to delay than to take unnecessary risks.”

After acknowledging Gardner Martin’s advice, Lumian left the carriage and headed towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.

He intended to conceal all his cash within the confines of the safe house.

After walking a certain distance, Lumian hesitated.

Safe houses didn’t guarantee absolute safety, especially in lower-class areas like the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique, where the population was denser. Thieves ran rampant in such places.

If a burglar were to stumble upon Aurore’s grimoires, they would be of little value to them. At most, they would search through them in the hopes of finding hidden banknotes, but the sum of over 26,000 cash would undoubtedly be taken.

Should I set up a few traps in the safe house to deter thieves? Lumian’s thoughts raced, and suddenly, a better idea struck him.

That idea was to provide Madam Magician with an advance payment of 26,000 verl d’or!

This way, there would be no risk of losing such a large sum of cash.

Furthermore, a lofty individual like Madam Magician would not deny accepting the advance payment.

Phew… With his mind made up, Lumian arrived at the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches and retrieved pen and paper to write a letter.

“Esteemed Madam Magician,

“I have already procured 26,000 verl d’or. I will offer this as an advance payment. Once I gather the remaining 4,000, you may send me the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.

“Looking forward to your reply.”

Lumian refrained from requesting Madam Magician to grant him the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic immediately, as he had yet to acquire the corresponding supplementary ingredients. Preserving Beyonder characteristics proved to be quite troublesome, and there was a risk of losing them.

After summoning the puppet messenger and entrusting it with the cloth bag containing cash and coins, along with the letter, Lumian felt a significant sense of relief. However, he couldn’t help but worry that the messenger might fall victim to robbery in the spirit world.

Before long, the puppet messenger adorned in a golden dress returned with a reply from Madam Magician.

“26,000 verl d’or has been received.

“Magician.”

It’s akin to receiving a receipt… Lumian murmured to himself, expressing gratitude to the puppet messenger.

He then departed Rue des Blouses Blanches and made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

As was his routine, Lumian used a short wire to open the door, quietly traversed the dimly lit lobby with only the basement bar’s glow, and ascended the stairs.

Reaching the second floor, he pursed his lips and continued upwards to the third floor, arriving at Room 310, where Flameng had once resided.

The wooden door to the room stood ajar, and the curtains remained undrawn, allowing the crimson moonlight to filter through the glass.

It was an unwritten folklore often believed by the lower-class citizens of Trier:

In a room where someone had met their demise, the door had to be left open and the curtains undrawn for three days.

This was done out of concern that the ghost of the deceased might be reluctant to depart.

Lumian stood at the doorway, gazing into the empty room, as if he could see the madman clutching his head and whispering, “I’m dying.”

After a while, he silently averted his gaze and proceeded towards the stairs.

As he approached the staircase, he overheard a conversation emanating from Room 302, despite their attempts to suppress their voices.

The room belonged to Ruhr and Michel, the sellers of counterfeit photographs who worked as part-time scavengers.

There was no sign of a kerosene or carbide lamp being lit within the room. No light seeped through the crack in the door.

Lumian’s acute hearing allowed him to instinctively tune in to the discussion between the elderly couple.

“Old Woman, look at these. They’re worth a fortune! Those gentlemen and ladies simply discarded them!”

“I reckon this bag alone could fetch 5 verl d’or…”

“5 verl d’or? It’s worth at least 15!”

“Old Man, if only we could stumble upon such valuable rubbish every day.”

“Then we’d have to vote for a member of parliament every day.”

“Praise the Sun. Let that member of parliament host a banquet every day. In that case, we could return to Aurmir and purchase 10 acres of fields to cultivate grapes within a year.”

“You’re quite the dreamer, Old Woman.

“What’s wrong with dreaming? Don’t you dream? Even without the banquet, we’ve managed to save up a significant sum. Another four or five years should suffice.”

“True. When the time comes, we won’t have to toil as hard as we do now, and we won’t need to worry about being unable to work…”

Lumian ceased eavesdropping and silently chuckled. Descending the stairs, he returned to Room 207, briefly freshened up, and climbed into bed.

In the midst of the night, half-asleep, he was suddenly startled by hurried footsteps.

As he sat up and glanced towards the corridor, there came a knock on his door.

Lumian, feeling a mix of wariness and confusion, approached the wooden door and opened it.

Standing outside was Madame Michel, the short, gray-haired woman adorned in a yellow cloth dress.

She spoke with fear and panic, “Ruhr has taken ill suddenly! Ciel—Monsieur Ciel, can you assist me in carrying him to the clinic on Rue des Blouses Blanches?

“I-I have the money for his treatment!”

Monsieur Ruhr is unwell? He was perfectly fine when I fell asleep… Lumian was taken aback.

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Chapter 235 - 235 “Disease”

235 “Disease”

Observing Lumian’s silence, Michel spoke with anxiety creeping into her voice.

“If you’re not willing, I can find someone else.”

“Who should I look for… They don’t really like us. They can’t stand our foul odor…”

That was precisely why she sought out Lumian, a leader of the mob. Lumian and Charlie were the only ones at Auberge du Coq Doré who could calmly communicate with the couple, but Charlie had already left.

Glancing at the short and hunched figure of Madame Michel, Lumian let out a sigh and responded.

“I’ll go and check it out.”

Still perplexed, he walked past Madame Michel, hastened up to the second floor, and entered Room 302.

The place was filled with various kinds of rubbish, emitting an indescribable stench. Lumian raised his hand, pinching his nose, and maneuvered his way through the cramped space, barely fitting a single person, until he reached the yellowish and greasy bedsheet.

Ruhr, with his wrinkled eyes tightly shut, lay on the bed, his face flushed and his breath ragged. He had fainted.

He’s seriously ill… Lumian furrowed his brow, holding his breath. He turned around and carried Ruhr out of the room.

Meanwhile, Michel swiftly rummaged through the piles of trash, uncovering hidden spots with single banknotes and coins, which she promptly concealed on her person.

Soon, they left Room 302. As Michel locked the door, she spoke to Lumian.

“Monsieur Ciel, pay me no mind. Send Ruhr to the clinic without me. I’ll catch up.”

Lumian nodded, quickened his pace, and sprinted out of Auberge du Coq Doré.

He was familiar with Rue des Blouses Blanches' clinics, often frequenting the area. After a short sprint, he spotted the Roblin Clinic, a small hospital in all but name.

Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman and Quartier de No?l had been neighboring districts for some time now. The Holy Palace Hospital, funded by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, was located across the bridge. As a result, only a few clinics were situated on this side of the bridge.

Roblin Clinic had two doctors on duty during the night. Temporary beds were set up in the spacious hall, with a few patients lying on them, receiving infusion treatments.

Lumian carried Ruhr to one of the doctors and gently placed him on a treatment bed.

The doctor, donning gold-rimmed glasses and in his early thirties, glanced at Lumian. Without directly mentioning any consultation fees, he disdainfully examined Ruhr's condition.

After a few minutes, he adjusted his glasses and spoke.

"He's running a high fever, but there don't appear to be any other symptoms. I suggest we try to bring down the fever first. If it persists, we should immediately transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital."

"Alright." Lumian possessed limited medical knowledge, so he could only heed the doctor's advice.

The doctor swiftly wrote a prescription for Lumian and instructed him to make the necessary payment. Lumian complied, receiving the fever medicine and infusion drip from the pharmacy.

The Fool Pharmaceutical Company's Type 1357 Fever Medicine… Lumian glanced at the prescription's contents and then proceeded to the payment window.

Madame Michel finally arrived, panting and exhausted.

She accepted the prescription from Lumian and glanced at the price. In a burst of frustration, she exclaimed, "It's 5 verl d'or…"

Without waiting for Lumian's response, she clenched her teeth and retrieved copper and silver coins. She gathered 5 verl d'or and paid the consultation fee.

Before long, Ruhr was carried to a temporary bed for the infusion.

This treatment had gained popularity only in recent years.

Madame Michel finally regained her composure and spoke to Lumian.

“Thank you, Monsieur Ciel. You can go back and rest. I’ll stay with Ruhr.”

Lumian didn’t insist. After all, he wasn’t a doctor.

He nodded slightly and directed his gaze towards Ruhr. Concentrating, he intended to check on his luck.

Lumian couldn’t help but furrow his brow.

Monsieur Ruhr was on the brink of death!

However, it wasn’t severe or evident. Unlike the previous vagrant, there seemed to be a chance of salvation.

Just as Lumian was about to suggest transferring him to the Holy Palace Hospital, Ruhr’s condition took a turn.

Translucent blisters resembling burns emerged on his skin. They swiftly filled with light yellow pus, exhibiting signs of festering.

Such symptoms, such progression, and such rapid evolution caused Lumian’s pupils to contract. His intuition informed him that this was no ordinary illness.

Perhaps it was connected to mysticism and supernatural forces!

Monsieur Ruhr is merely a scavenger. Why is he affected by supernatural powers? Lumian raised his head and pointed at the unconscious Ruhr. He addressed Madame Michel, “You’re believers of the Eternal Blazing Sun, correct? Take him to the église Saint-Robert and give it a try.”

He sensed that the Holy Palace Hospital might not be equipped to treat an illness involving supernatural powers. It would be better to visit the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and determine if purification could eliminate the effects.

Madame Michel noticed her husband’s peculiar transformation and pleaded with a sobbing tone, “No, transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital! Transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital!”

To Madame Michel’s understanding, seeking blessings at the cathedral was akin to giving up on treatment and preparing for the solace of a deathbed.

Lumian refrained from persuading her, realizing that it was the dead of night and église Saint-Robert had long closed its doors. Moreover, Ruhr and Michel were nothing more than a couple of scavengers, so the chances of the cathedral opening for them were slim.

Additionally, église Saint-Robert was quite far away. Ruhr’s condition was rapidly deteriorating, and he might not survive the journey, let alone live long enough to rouse the cathedral’s caretakers to unlock the door.

Lumian observed Ruhr, whose blisters had burst and were now oozing pus. After a brief moment of silence, he spoke to Madame Michel, “Find a doctor and transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital immediately.”

“Alright, alright!” Michel snapped out of her daze and hurriedly approached the doctor who had attended to Ruhr.

Once she vacated the temporary bed, Lumian positioned himself to block the view of the other patients. From his pocket, he retrieved an iron-colored metal canister adorned with a spring fountain pattern.

This was the Healing Agent he had obtained from “Baldy” Harman!

Lumian believed that ailments as a result of mysticism could only be countered by mysticism remedies. Although uncertain whether this agent, primarily meant for external injuries, would work on Ruhr, he was determined to give it a shot.

Unscrewing the cap, he pinched Ruhr’s mouth open and forced down half of the agent.

Ruhr, seemingly parched, instinctively swallowed the clear liquid resembling a refreshing spring.

After two gulps, he began to calm down.

In less than a minute, Madame Michel returned with the doctor. The blisters on Ruhr’s face shriveled, scabbed over, and silently fell away.

It actually worked… Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and focused on observing the shifts in Ruhr’s fate.

This time, there were no signs of impending death. Ruhr’s destiny for the next few days appeared somewhat chaotic, making it difficult for Lumian to decipher or speculate upon.

Perplexed, the doctor glanced at Ruhr and asked Madame Michel, “Isn’t he in pretty good shape?”

Madame Michel also noticed that the dreadful blisters that had marred her husband’s face were now gone, leaving behind only scars and wrinkles. His breathing had steadied and was no longer labored.

“I apologize for my anxiety,” she quickly apologized.

The doctor, irritated by the stench emanating from her and Ruhr, waved his hand dismissively.

“The Fool Pharmaceutical Company’s medications are far more effective than others. Since the situation has improved, keep a close eye on him. Don’t rush to transfer him to the Holy Palace Hospital.”

With that, he hastily departed from the temporary bed.

Madame Michel slumped down next to Ruhr, occasionally checking his forehead to gauge his body temperature.

Lumian remained by their side. He pulled up a stool and sat, attentively observing Ruhr's condition.

Ten minutes later, Ruhr opened his eyes and gazed blankly at the unfamiliar white ceiling.

"Where am I?"

Michel let out a sigh of relief and swiftly recounted his sudden illness.

"Why did I fall ill out of the blue?" Ruhr was bewildered. "I felt perfectly fine before going to bed."

Interrupting their conversation, Lumian casually inquired, "What did you do before bed that was different from your usual routine?"

"Nothing," Ruhr pondered for a moment before replying, "Just the usual routine. I sorted through the trash I collected, went to the washroom, had a chat, and then went to sleep… Maybe I came back late last night. It was nearly one o'clock by the time I finished sorting. I guess I ended up sleeping too late…"

Could there be something amiss with the garbage? Or did something occur during the day that only manifested in the dead of night? Lumian delved deeper, hoping for valuable clues from Ruhr and Michel, but alas, his efforts proved fruitless.

Ruhr recuperated swiftly. Once the IV had been administered, he insisted on leaving the Roblin Clinic immediately, unwilling to spend any more money and determined to return to the motel before dawn.

Observing that Ruhr's luck remained unchanged, Lumian didn't try to dissuade him.

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 302.

Lumian furrowed his brow, surveying the piles of garbage emitting various odors, hoping to pinpoint the problematic one. Ruhr and Michel stood beside him, expressing their gratitude incessantly.

Given the peculiar environment, his sense of smell proved useless. Lumian activated his Spirit Vision and observed for a while, yet found no clues.

He could only say to Ruhr and Michel, "We can't rule out the possibility that there might be something contaminated in this trash that caused your illness. Sleep in a different room tonight and wait until morning."

Lumian intended to seek the assistance of Franca, a skilled Witch in divination, once she awoke, in order to identify the source of the problem.

Before Ruhr could respond, Michel, terrified by her husband's sudden illness and brush with death, spoke up.

"Alright! Thank you, Monsieur Ciel."

Two vacant rooms were available on the third floor. Lumian arranged for Ruhr and Michel to rest in Room 307.

It was already past four in the morning. Lumian returned to Room 207 and lay on the bed, contemplating the reason behind the strange occurrence. Gradually, he drifted off into a dazed slumber.

Suddenly, he jolted awake, barely catching a glimpse of a woman's anguished cry.

Lumian's heart tightened as he grabbed Fallen Mercury and left the room. Following the sound of the wailing, he ascended to the third floor.

In the darkness, his heart sank as he slowed his pace, filled with trepidation.

Finally, he halted outside Room 307. In the crimson moonlight that filtered through the curtains, he spotted Madame Michel kneeling before the bed, weeping uncontrollably.

Sensing his approach, Michel, clad in a yellow gown, turned her tear-streaked face in the dimness and directed her gaze towards the door.

Her voice hollow, she uttered, "Ciel—Monsieur Ciel, Ruhr is dead…"

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Chapter 236 - 236 Morning Light

236 Morning Light

He's dead… Lumian thought, his heart heavy with the news he had anticipated but couldn't fully accept.

Leaving the clinic, Ruhr had appeared to have recovered, escaping the clutches of death. How could he have died so suddenly?

With a heavy heart, Lumian stepped into Room 307, fixing his gaze upon the bed.

There lay Ruhr, his body plagued by festering wounds that oozed a faint yellow pus. His complexion was pale and sickly, and he lay completely still.

Ruhr's eyes were wide open, and there was evidence of vomit around his mouth.

After a few moments of silently studying Ruhr's dazed, pained eyes, Lumian spoke in a deep voice, "When did he pass away?"

Michel, her white hair now devoid of its usual luster, slowly shook her head and replied, "I was exhausted and fell asleep. When I awoke, he was already gone…"

"Did he return to Room 302 before bedtime?" Lumian inquired, pressing for details.

"No, he only went to the washroom near Room 302. I followed him…" Michel's voice carried a deep timbre, but it gave Lumian an otherworldly sensation, as though a part of her soul had left her body.

They had all visited the washroom. One fell victim to the strange ailment, while the other remained unscathed… Lumian furrowed his brow, determined to investigate the washroom.

If nothing seems amiss there, the likelihood of Madame Michel being abnormal becomes increasingly probable!

As Lumian departed from Room 307, heading toward the designated washroom, Michel remained kneeling by the bed, quietly weeping, unaware of the other's movements.

The third-floor restroom was no longer as filthy as before, thanks to the regular cleaning ladies. Although some stains and trash were unavoidable after a day's use, it was still passable for civilized individuals.

Lumian glanced around, taking in the sight of the toilet bowl and sink illuminated by the moon's crimson glow streaming through the window. He noticed the rusty tap and mirror, reflecting his own image.

After careful observation, he noticed a white silk handkerchief draped over a pipe in a hidden corner.

Even with a casual glance, Lumian could tell that it didn't belong to any of the current residents of Auberge du Coq Doré. The fabric was of superior quality, adorned with elegant embroidery—a clear sign of its expense.

An outsider, perhaps? Lumian's initial instinct was to pick up the silk handkerchief and examine it more closely. However, he quickly reminded himself of the sight of Monsieur Ruhr's festering body when he had fallen ill and forced himself to restrain his impulses.

Lumian's mind raced as he left the washroom and returned to Room 307. He approached Madame Michel, who was still sobbing, and inquired, "Do you know who the handkerchief in the washroom belongs to?"

Confused and filled with sorrow, Michel instinctively replied, "It's Ruhr's."

Monsieur Ruhr's? Lumian was both surprised and convinced.

He pressed further, "Where did it come from?"

Madame Michel gazed at Ruhr's grotesque, lifeless form and spoke dreamily, "It was among the trash we collected tonight. I wonder which gentleman or lady discarded it…

"It had phlegm on it but was undamaged. Ruhr cleaned it and intended to sell it second-hand instead of throwing it away…

"After you mentioned the possibility of something unclean in the trash, Ruhr took it out and hid it in the washroom. He didn't dare to return to Room 302…"

Phlegm… Lumian felt he had discovered the root of the problem.

He let out a slow exhale and said, "Did Monsieur Ruhr touch the handkerchief again? Did you?"

"I don't know…" Madame Michel shook her head slowly. "He went to the washroom by himself. I didn't touch it…"

As expected… Lumian retrieved his gloves and put them on. He returned to the washroom and used Fallen Mercury to lift the white silk handkerchief. He carefully placed it in the white paper he had with him, folding it neatly.

Throughout the process, he made sure not to touch the handkerchief directly.

Afterward, Lumian wiped Fallen Mercury's blade with another piece of white paper and tossed the crumpled ball into the toilet bowl. He waited for it to soften and then flushed it away.

Stepping out of the washroom, he noticed Madame Michel standing silently by the door of Room 307, like a ghost wandering in the darkness.

As Lumian approached her, the old lady with white hair wore a pleading expression.

"It's almost dawn, Monsieur Ciel. Could you help me move Ruhr back to Room 302?"

Her voice still held a dreamy quality.

Lumian was taken aback. After a brief pause of five or six seconds, he replied, "Okay."

He entered Room 307 and carefully wrapped Monsieur Ruhr's body in the bedsheets, hoisting him onto his back.

With just a few steps, Lumian carried the lifeless form and placed it on the bed in Room 302.

Madame Michel, having squeezed through the trash, expressed her profuse gratitude before striding towards the wooden table and drawing back the curtains.

It was almost 6 a.m. As the first rays of dawn broke through the sky, dimming the crimson moonlight, Michel listened to the vendors outside the motel and fixated her gaze on Ruhr.

Lumian retreated from Room 302 and returned to the corridor, stepping out of the reach of the light. He leaned silently against the wall, not disturbing the serene scene.

After a few minutes, Madame Michel suddenly sprang into action.

She rummaged through the room, finding more banknotes and coins. Then, she hastened out of the room and descended downstairs.

Lumian didn't follow. He raised his right foot to the wall and leaned against the sleeping darkness of the wall.

As time passed, Madame Michel returned with an abundance of items.

There was a bottle of red wine, grilled cod, cured meat, meatloaf, soybean paste, hot sauce, and apples.

Without sparing a glance for Lumian, Madame Michel entered Room 302. She collapsed onto the bed and placed the food beside the decaying corpse.

After a moment's contemplation, she rose again and ignited the carbide lamp on the wooden table, filling the room with its glow.

Madame Michel once again lowered herself to the floor, picked up the meatloaf, and brought it to Ruhr's mouth. Smiling, she uttered, "Haven't you been craving meatloaf lately? I bought it for you today."

After allowing some of the oil to moisten the corpse's lips, Madame Michel took a bite of the meatloaf and savored it with closed eyes.

"It's delicious. How long has it been since we last ate? Two weeks, right?"

Having taken a few more bites of the meatloaf, Madame Michel seized the bottle of red wine and took a swig.

Mumbling, she continued, "Old Man, our vines have produced red wine. We needn't worry about what the future holds!"

Engaging in one-sided conversation with Ruhr's lifeless body, she continued to indulge in wine and various delicacies.

Outside the door, Lumian remained in the darkness, leaning against the wall as he silently observed the unfolding scene. He neither entered nor departed.

Soon enough, Madame Michel began to feel the effects of her intoxication. As a former barmaid, she began to sing loudly:

"Trier, a city dressed in gold,

"A ball that endures 'til dawn unfolds;

"Chicken roasted, dripping with oil's grace,

"A castle cake to fill each eager embrace.

"A bow-tied attendant glides 'mongst the guests,

"Merrily dancing with joy and delight.

"My beloved, hidden 'midst the crowd,

"Among them, a beacon shining bright.

"Among them, my love resides,

"In the Capital of Joy, forever Trier!"

Madame Michel rose unsteadily and stumbled towards the wooden table, gathering the banknotes in front of the carbide lamp.

In an instant, the cash caught fire and flames erupted on the table, emitting a bright yellow glow.

With her arms outstretched, Madame Michel shouted, “In the Capital of Joy, forever Trier!”

She retrieved the rope that had once bound the sack and climbed onto the wooden table, tying the rope firmly to the window frame with a tight knot.

In the flickering light of the fire, Madame Michel turned to face Ruhr, lying motionless on the bed. She positioned the knot around her neck and bent her legs.

The knot tightened, and Madame Michel’s eyes bulged in her struggle for breath.

Outside the window, the sky grew brighter, casting a faint light that bathed a portion of the corridor. Lumian leaned against the wall, concealed in the shadows. With his hands in his pockets and his right foot propped up, he gazed impassively at Madame Michel, suspended from the window frame. He witnessed her mouth gradually open, her expression contort in pain, and her bent legs letting up upon her demise.

In the morning light, the corpse swayed gently.

…

At 6:35 a.m., 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601.

Startled by the knocks on the door, Franca, her flaxen hair disheveled, wore a bitter expression as she rose from her slumber.

“I’ve only had three hours of sleep. Three hours!”

“Help me inspect the contents for any anomalies.” Lumian ignored Franca’s complaints and presented the handkerchief wrapped in white paper. “Be cautious. It might be infectious.”

“Infectious?” Franca snapped out of her daze and retreated to her room, donning translucent, pale-yellow rubber gloves.

She carefully unwrapped the outer layer of paper, extracted the silk handkerchief within, and placed it on the glass coffee table.

Tapping her teeth while observing intently, Franca spoke with a solemn expression,

“There is indeed an issue. There are numerous small but active spirits lingering on it. They belong to the same category.

“I suspect it’s a pathogen. It spreads through direct contact with the skin or even blood exchange. Based on your description, it’s not highly contagious.”

Although Lumian didn't comprehend the concept of a pathogen fully, he grasped the essence of Franca's explanation.

He fell into silence momentarily before saying, "Can you determine the owner of this handkerchief?"

"No problem. With a powerful medium present, as long as they don't possess strong anti-divination abilities, I can locate them." As Franca spoke, black flames flickered on her rubber gloves.

After "cleansing" the area, she removed her gloves and retrieved a makeup mirror. Hovering her left palm over the handkerchief, she stroked the mirror with her right hand.

Reciting a series of incantations in a hushed tone, her eyes darkened.

She repeated the divination statement.

"The owner of this handkerchief.

"The owner of this handkerchief…"

After several repetitions, the mirror emitted an aqueous glow, reflecting a figure in the darkness.

It was a slender young man with a pale complexion and an unhealthy appearance.

His curly dark-yellow hair framed his face, and his brown eyes conveyed an unmasked indifference. Clad in a black tailcoat, he clutched a white silk handkerchief. He coughed twice and expectorated into the fabric.

Lumian strained to capture the person's features, feeling a sense of familiarity wash over him. It was as if he had encountered this individual somewhere before.

After a brief recollection, it dawned on him.

This was a member of Hugues Artois's campaign team, the one who stood behind the red-haired woman!

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Chapter 237 - 237 Concealment

237 Concealment

“So? Do you know him?” Franca glanced at Lumian, seeking his insight.

Lumian shifted his gaze away from the mirror, its reflection gradually fading, and spoke with a deep voice, “He’s one of Hugues Artois’s men. I spotted him during the campaign.”

Franca furrowed her brow, closing her makeup mirror and inquiring, “What happened?”

Lumian recounted the encounter between Ruhr and Michel, concluding, “There’s something suspicious about this man.”

Franca sighed, remarking, “They’re already in such dire straits as scavengers, and yet they still have to face such a situation…”

She scoffed, adding, “Considering Lady Moon’s endorsement of Hugues Artois as an open-minded individual, it wouldn’t surprise me if he surrounds himself with peculiar characters.”

Pausing to look at Lumian, Franca continued, “Hugues Artois is now a member of parliament. He’ll have both visible and covert protection. If we make a move against him or his associates, we’ll easily be tracked down. The consequences would be severe.”

“Let’s entrust this matter to the official Beyonders for further investigation. I can’t guarantee much else. At the very least, the Inquisition’s Purifiers and members of the Machinery Hivemind won’t turn a blind eye to such affairs. They will find a way to uncover the truth and assess the situation,” Franca suggested.

Lumian nodded slowly and inquired, “Then which Sequence or pathway could it be? Can phlegm transmit such a deadly disease?”

As he made his way from Auberge du Coq Doré to Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian diligently recalled the twenty-two paths of the divine detailed in Aurore’s grimoires but found no match for the current circumstances.

Franca pondered deeply and said, “My understanding of the twenty-two paths of the divine is similar to your sister’s, but I have a more comprehensive knowledge of certain aspects. I can only think of one pathway that fits the criteria, but it’s of a higher level and exclusive to women. It doesn’t align with the target’s situation.”

“Hmm… Considering we’ve encountered the Great Mother and the Blessed of the Mother Tree of Desire, could our target be someone blessed by another evil deity?”

“Heh heh, if it truly involves the faith of an evil god, the Beyonders from both Churches will undoubtedly intensify their efforts.”

“Yes, Ruhr’s death is peculiar indeed. As long as the investigating police aren’t blind, they’ll swiftly report it to their superiors, who will assign someone capable to handle the case.”

Lumian acknowledged her words briefly, his expression softening.

After bidding farewell to Franca, he made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

As he walked past the reception desk, Madame Fels rose to her feet, a mix of fear and flattery evident in her voice as she greeted, “Good morning, Monsieur Ciel.”

A few days ago, the police had informed her that Monsieur Ive was believed to be involved in a cult and had become a wanted criminal. They had requested her to use the rental income to cover expenses and ensure the motel’s smooth operation during this period. Additionally, they wanted her to keep a record of the accounts. Once the elections were over, they would settle the matter of Auberge du Coq Doré’s ownership promptly.

Madame Fels felt uneasy, fearing that the new boss would dismiss her. Subconsciously, she tried to win Ciel’s favor, hoping that a leader of the Savoie Mob would stand up for her when the time came. Whoever took control of Auberge du Coq Doré would not want to offend the corresponding mob, unless they had influential connections.

“Good morning,” Lumian replied simply. He walked along the wall, covered in newspapers and pink paper to conceal stains, cracks, and bedbugs, making his way up to the third floor.

He had locked the door to Room 302 before the other tenants on the third floor had awakened, so as of yet, no one had discovered the lifeless bodies of Ruhr and Michel.

Madame Michel’s singing before she took her own life had failed to disturb the neighbors. To those residing on Rue Anarchie, various noises during the night were commonplace. Singing, gunshots, brawls, shouting, and sporting activities were nothing worth paying attention to.

Lumian returned the silk handkerchief to its hidden spot in the washroom before pausing in front of Room 302. Extending his left hand clad in a black glove, he turned the handle and opened the creaking wooden door.

Madame Michel’s lifeless form hung silently in the room. The aroma of food mingled with the surrounding stench of garbage, filling the space as the light grew

brighter.

Lumian gazed at the scene for over ten seconds before slowly turning away, preparing to leave.

…

It was nearly eight o'clock when the two police officers arrived at Auberge du Coq Doré. They spotted Lumian, who had disguised himself using the Mystery Prying Glasses.

"Why is there another death?" grumbled the officer who had previously interrogated Lumian.

His face was rugged, lacking in handsome features, and bore the marks of age.

Lumian responded calmly, "One died of illness. I'm no doctor, unable to save him."

"And the other one?" the officer pressed for more information.

Lumian replied honestly, "She took her own life after the blow."

The older-looking policeman furrowed his brow and entered Room 302, accompanied by his partner.

The first sight that greeted them was Madame Michel's lifeless body hanging from the window frame. The officer instinctively covered his nose.

The place was far too filthy and foul-smelling!

Next, his gaze fell upon Ruhr's decaying corpse, observing the putrefying flesh and spilled blood.

"Son of a bitch, you call this an illness?" he couldn't help but turn to Lumian, his eyes filled with shock and fear.

Lumian briefly recounted the events of the previous night, omitting the fact that Ruhr's condition had worsened while he was at Roblin Clinic and had been revived by half a bottle of Healing Agent. Lumian attributed the credit to The Fool Pharmaceuticals' fever-reducing medicine.

He also mentioned his suspicion that the Ruhrs had encountered an infectious source within the pile of garbage they had collected the previous night, causing them to sleep in Room 307. Lumian brought up Madame Michel's mention of a silk handkerchief in the washroom as well.

The more the two officers listened, the quieter they became, their expressions slightly off.

After Lumian finished speaking, they hurried to the washroom to confirm the presence of the silk handkerchief.

The older-looking officer glanced at Ciel outside and whispered to his partner, “Another mysticism incident. Stay here and guard the scene. I’ll report the situation.”

The other officer nodded.

“No problem.”

Lumian observed as they divided the tasks, patiently awaiting the arrival of the official Beyonders.

In less than half an hour, the older-looking policeman returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, alone.

Where are the official Beyonders? Lumian’s eyes widened in surprise.

The older-looking policeman avoided Lumian’s gaze and pulled his partner to the end of the corridor, engaging in a hushed conversation.

Lumian stood at a distance, straining his ears to catch their words, but they remained unintelligible.

After a while, the older-looking officer approached Lumian, his expression grave.

“We’ve preliminarily determined it as death due to illness and suicide.”

No further investigation? Lumian’s eyebrows twitched in disbelief.

The officer repeated what he had said when they had taken Flameng’s body away. He donned gloves, carefully placed the silk handkerchief into a cloth bag, and secured it tightly.

Lumian silently observed as they removed the corpses, wrapped Ruhr’s body, and placed him in a body bag. Numerous thoughts raced through his mind.

Even though he died in such a manner, the official Beyonders don’t find it suspicious? No need for further investigation?

Or perhaps the police officer didn’t report the matter, and the official Beyonders remain unaware?

Could someone have intervened and persuaded them to treat this as an ordinary death case, not involving any criminal offense?

“…”

With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian quietly followed the officer carrying the two bodies to the carriage.

From a distance, he trailed them, detecting the lingering odor emanating from Ruhr's and Michel's bodies. He tracked them all the way to the entrance of the police headquarters in the market district.

Lumian furrowed his brow as he observed uniformed police officers entering and exiting the building.

His initial suspicion was that an officer from the police headquarters had halted the investigation, but he couldn't confirm the identity.

Even if he were to enter the police headquarters, given the circumstances and his own status, it would be impossible for him to trace their steps all the way to the relevant office. If he observed from outside, he wouldn't be able to discern who might be involved from the people coming out.

Lumian pondered the direction of his investigation once more.

Get Franca to use divination?

But there's no medium available…

Alternatively… Why did the officer stop the investigation? Was he aware that someone would be implicated, or had someone already alerted him to such matters beforehand?

If it's the latter, there's a high chance that he holds considerable influence within the parliamentarian's office…

Lumian's heart stirred as he left the entrance of the police headquarters and swiftly arrived outside the four-story khaki-colored building that housed the parliamentarian's office in the market district.

Taking cover in an alley across the street, he found himself in the company of a group of vagrants.

Before long, his eyes landed on an officer.

The officer was plump, in his early forties, with brown hair and blue eyes. Three-petaled silver-white sweet irises adorned his black epaulets.

This indicated that he was a chief inspector, one rank lower than a superintendent.

As Lumian watched the chief inspector enter the parliamentarian's office, a smile curled upon his lips.

…

In the khaki-colored four-story building, on the second floor…

Tybalt, his face pale and his hair curly and yellow, entered the office of the member of parliament's secretary.

The secretary, a man in his thirties with neatly combed back black hair and blue eyes hidden behind gold-rimmed glasses, possessed refined features and an air of sophistication.

He glanced at Tybalt, who was coughing, and tossed a cloth bag on the table. With a cold expression, he spoke, "We've recovered your handkerchief."

Tybalt, his dark-yellow hair curly, was attired in a black suit. He smiled and replied, "That was quick."

"You bastard!" the member of parliament's secretary cursed. "Do you not realize that your phlegm can spread diseases to others? Aren't you afraid of attracting the attention of the two Churches?"

Tybalt's brown eyes remained indifferent as he nonchalantly remarked, "At most, two or three commoners might die. No one would care about them. I've been sick for far too long without receiving a new boon. It frustrates me, and it makes me want to kill someone."

The member of parliament's secretary stared at him for a few seconds before admonishing in a deep voice, "If I hadn't taken precautions in advance, the Purifiers would have come looking for you. Your life is inconsequential. Don't jeopardize us! Tybalt, there will be no next time."

Tybalt shrugged, accepting the reprimand.

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Chapter 238 - 238 Endure

238 Endure

Lumian sat in the alleyway across from the member of parliament's office, blending in with a group of tramps.

Having followed and observed carefully, he had pieced together the entire situation.

Within the office, someone had managed to find a reliable officer beforehand and instructed him to monitor cases of mysterious illnesses in their jurisdiction. This officer would keep things quiet, refraining from reporting to the corresponding official Beyonders. Furthermore, any evidence he discovered would be sent to the member of parliament's office.

This revelation implied that the sickly lad who had spat into the handkerchief and discarded it knew the consequences of his actions. As long as he kept his mouth shut, the member of parliament would never seek assistance from the police headquarters!

Lumian's gaze fixated on the khaki-colored four-story building. His hands unconsciously balled into fists, yet he restrained himself from taking any drastic measures.

After a while, he let out a slow exhale.

Just then, a familiar figure emerged from the door of the building that housed the member of parliament's office.

This man donned a silk top hat and wielded a dark cane. Clad in a sharp black suit, a thick brown beard adorned his mouth and chin. Deep wrinkles framed his dark-blue, almost black eyes.

It was Bono Goodville, the owner of Goodville Chemical Factory. He had left the celebratory banquet earlier than Gardner Martin—the boss of the Savoie Mob—the previous night. Occasionally, his photos would appear in certain newspaper reports.

Lumian averted his gaze and waited. Only when the chief inspector left the member of parliament's office unaccompanied and returned to the police headquarters did he rise from the alleyway teeming with tramps. He casually found a café and enjoyed a simple late breakfast.

Shortly before 11 a.m., he knocked on Franca's door once again.

“How did it go? Have the official Beyonders taken over?” Franca had already risen from bed and changed into her favorite white blouse and light-colored breeches.

Lumian shook his head. “No.”

As he stepped into the apartment, he elaborated, “It was brushed under the carpet by a chief inspector from the police headquarters.”

Franca comprehended the situation and couldn’t help but scoff. “Even the folks at the member of parliament’s office recognize the problems of spitting anywhere!”

Lumian found a spot on the sofa and sat down. He recounted everything, from the moment the police arrived to investigate the scene until the chief inspector entered the member of parliament’s office.

Franca peered into his eyes, contemplating for a few seconds before speaking up,

“I understand that you find it hard to accept and that a fire might be raging in your heart. I truly empathize with you. Though that couple had no relation to you, you tried your utmost to save them, only to meet with failure. Many people can sympathize with such tragic encounters.

“But I must insist, be patient, endure, restrain yourself from rash actions or seeking revenge. These individuals are connected to the member of parliament. If anything were to happen, the situation would explode. It’s beyond our capacity to bear.”

Observing Lumian’s silence and absence of emotional outburst, Franca let out a sigh of relief and continued, “I’ll say it once more. It’s best to leave this matter to the official Beyonders for investigation. Later, through my contacts, I’ll inform them of this case and provide the suspect’s identity and description.

“Although crucial physical evidence might have been lost by now and the body likely cremated hastily, as long as the official Beyonders discover the existence of abnormal pathway Beyonder powers in their jurisdiction, targeting the person I identified through divination, they will discover his problem sooner or later.”

Upon hearing Franca’s advice, Lumian nodded, his thoughts aligning with her suggestion.

“Let’s go with that plan.”

Franca relaxed, taking a moment to contemplate before speaking again.

“I won’t divulge the precise details. I’ll merely mention a peculiar ailment causing festering in the market district. There’s suspicion that someone from the member of parliament’s office might have wrapped a handkerchief around thick phlegm, and similar incidents may have been concealed by the police headquarters.

“If I don’t do this, the official Beyonders might suspect you as the source of the information and thoroughly investigate you.”

Lumian acknowledged her concerns with a curt response, signifying his agreement.

After bidding farewell to Franca and departing Rue des Blouses Blanches, he encountered Jenna on his way to Salle de Bal Brise.

“Well, if it isn’t Celia?” Lumian greeted.

Showy Diva, dressed in a simple grayish-blue gown, had her brownish-yellow hair tied up in a natural bun. Her face lacked makeup, giving her an elegant appearance without her usual air of decadence.

Upon hearing Lumian call her by her real name, Jenna clenched her teeth and retorted,

“Just call me Jenna!”

Lumian sized her up.

“Did your mother hit you with a broomstick? Are you considering leaving the underground singer circle?”

“Dammit! You can’t seem to wish anything good upon me, can you?” Jenna exclaimed. “My mother is a gentle and reasonable person. Why would she hit me with a broomstick?”

She smirked confidently.

“Initially, she opposed my singing in the dance halls, thinking it was dangerous and prone to debauchery. But after I explained how much I could earn each week without having to sleep with any man, she relented. She even said she’d come to Salle de Bal Brise after work today to watch me perform. Dammit, what am I going to do?”

Lumian deliberately asked, “If your mother saw you wearing a revealing dress and deliberately raising your leg while singing ‘his touch is skilled indeed,’ how would she react?”

Jenna tousled her brownish-yellow hair. “She’d storm the stage and beat me to a pulp!”

She mumbled to herself before suggesting, “I don’t have to wear overly revealing dresses. Remember when I tried singing in a cocktail dress last time? The response was pretty good. It’s been a while, but I can give it another shot. The key is the song selection. I’ll discuss it with Franca. She has excellent taste. She even knows how to compose her own songs and write lyrics, though they’re all rather peculiar…”

Lumian smiled and spoke up, “If that doesn’t work out, I can have René organize a themed night event at Salle de Bal Brise. Tonight’s theme will be love.”

This would pair well with less suggestive love songs.

Jenna’s eyes lit up. “That’s a brilliant idea!”

She looked at Lumian awkwardly, offering her thanks.

“You’re quite quick-witted. Uh, dammit, thank you!”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, Jenna instinctively glanced around and lowered her voice.

“I also told my mother that I’m good friends with Red Boots from the Savoie Mob and that she’s protecting me. That’s how I can sing at Salle de Bal Brise and stay safe. Remember, I came to you that day to negotiate a higher singing fee. And thanks to Franca, you agreed.

“If my mother asks you, just give this answer.”

Lumian nodded and teased, “It’s called collusion.”

“It’s called a harmless fib,” Jenna replied gleefully. “Just hold onto that story until I’ve been singing for another year. I’ll save up enough money for my tuition and pay off my debts.”

Lumian glanced at the apprentice actress and pondered, “Haven’t you thought about seeking proper compensation for that accident?”

“How?” Jenna’s eyes widened in confusion. “The court hasn’t reached a final verdict yet.”

Lumian chuckled.

“Why wait for the court? Settling debts is protected by the Guardian of Businesses. We can handle it ourselves.”

“That factory owner never said he wouldn’t pay us. His constant appeals are just about the division of responsibilities and the amount of compensation…” Jenna eyed Lumian suspiciously. “Are you suggesting we force him to compensate us? That’s illegal!”

“Illegal?” Lumian looked amused. “As a mob leader, I break the law every day. Didn’t you want to assassinate Margot and avenge your friend? Did legality matter to you back then?”

Jenna’s words faltered as she muttered,

“Margot is a mob leader who has committed countless crimes. Each one of them is deserving of the gallows.”

“So you want to be his judge and jury?” Lumian smiled. “That factory owner may have done many wrongs. Let’s mask our faces, infiltrate his house, tie him up, and make him compensate everyone. Alternatively, we can convince him to hand over the money quietly and split it among ourselves to avoid arousing suspicion during subsequent investigations.”

Jenna wore a troubled expression.

“I’ll think about it. I’ll consider it.”

Ciel lived up to his reputation as a mob leader. Discussing breaking the law came as naturally to him as eating and drinking.

Lumian didn’t press the matter further. Since Jenna wasn’t in a hurry, he saw no need to worry about her.

…

As evening approached, Lumian sat in the café on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, awaiting another night.

For now, he had nothing to occupy his time. All he could do was wait for Franca or the Boss to procure the additional ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion, the final step before his breakthrough to Sequence 7.

“Boss, what would you like to have for dinner tonight?” Louis asked Lumian as the sky grew darker.

Just as Lumian was about to respond, Jenna approached.

Showy Diva had transformed herself, donning a dress the color of roses. The hem of her gown appeared to defy gravity, resembling an inverted flower.

Her long, brownish-yellow hair was fashioned into a simple bun, with most of it cascading smoothly over her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle, accentuating her complexion and striking features. A mole adorned the right side of her face, and she held a beautifully patterned fan in her hand.

This left Louis and Sarkota dumbfounded. They could hardly believe that this was the same “Little Minx” Jenna.

Jenna nervously asked Lumian, “Is this suitable?”

“Quite impressive.” Lumian didn’t discourage Jenna.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion echoed in the distance. The ground trembled visibly, and the café’s glass windows rattled.

“Dammit, what’s happening?” Jenna exclaimed, peering out of the window in shock.

Lumian stood up and made his way to the window. As he looked outside, he noticed the perplexed and flustered pedestrians.

In the distance, a plume of black smoke billowed from the south.

“Find out what’s going on,” Lumian instructed Louis.

Once Louis departed, Jenna approached Lumian, her gaze fixed on the dark smoke rising from the southern part of the market district. Anxiousness and concern filled her.

After some time, Louis returned to the café and reported to Lumian, “Boss, there was an explosion at the Goodville Chemical Factory.”

A thud interrupted the conversation as Lumian turned to see Jenna’s fan fall to the ground.

Jenna appeared to lose her spirit as she murmured, sounding disoriented, “My mother, my mother is there…

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Chapter 239 - 239 Fighting Fire

239 Fighting Fire

Before she could finish, Jenna snapped out of her daze. Adorned in a rose-colored dress that hugged her slender frame, she hurried towards the staircase and descended.

Witnessing this, Lumian motioned for Louis and Sarkota to maintain order in Salle de Bal Brise before giving chase.

Anxiety and fear filled Jenna's face, her expression teetering on the edge of collapse.

She made no attempt to conceal her Beyonder identity. She exerted every ounce of her strength, as if she intended to soar through Avenue du Marché and into the streets leading south of the market district.

Only the darkness of the sky and the unlit gas street lamps, combined with the chaos caused by the panicked pedestrians after the explosion, prevented anyone from noticing the extraordinary speed at which the woman ran.

Lumian swiftly caught up to her, his pace surpassing hers. He urgently tapped her shoulder and said, "Take to the shadows!"

Determined to reach Goodville Chemical Factory as swiftly as possible, Jenna ran a distance before comprehending Lumian's meaning. She altered her course slightly and darted towards the dimly lit area cast by the unilluminated street lamps, blending in seamlessly.

Assassins possessed the ability to conceal themselves within shadows.

Jenna's emotions surged, making it difficult for her to maintain control. Additionally, sprinting at full speed weakened the effectiveness of this ability. At times, she would become visible, and at others, she would vanish. Nevertheless, compared to before, she managed to avoid drawing much attention from passersby.

Lumian ran alongside the shadows, paying no heed to the perplexed gazes directed his way, his nostrils filled with the lingering scent of Jenna's perfume.

Pushing his Hunter's speed to its limits, he left observers dumbfounded.

Certainly, such behavior would arouse suspicion, but he paid it no mind.

As the two Beyonders endowed with enhanced physiques raced at full tilt, they arrived at Rue Saint-Gerre near Trier's city walls within a mere ten minutes.

The area was teeming with factories, and the sky was shrouded in dusky smoke tinged with a yellowish hue, obscuring the fading glow of the sunset.

Emerging from the shadows, Jenna caught sight of the blazing metal container—Goodville Chemical Factory was engulfed in flames, with firefighters battling desperately to extinguish the inferno and rescue those trapped inside.

Some of the rescuers wore peculiar masks adorned with elongated, pointed beaks, while others sported mechanical octopuses on their faces. Several donned black helmets that appeared to consist of multiple layers. The commonality among them was the presence of apparatuses resembling steam backpacks, albeit with significant differences. Thick rubber hoses extended from the contraptions, connecting to the "masks."

Without a moment's hesitation, Jenna rushed for Goodville Chemical Factory, where sporadic explosions continued to erupt.

The pungent odor in the air threatened to overwhelm Lumian's sense of smell. He seized Jenna's shoulder and spoke in a deep voice, "Do you know which factory your mother is in?"

Jenna was taken aback. "I don't know."

"Have you come equipped to shield yourself from chemical contamination?" Lumian switched questions.

"No," Jenna replied, her confusion evident.

"Then are you attempting to commit suicide?" Lumian scolded. "Perhaps your mother has already been rescued. Let us first search the area where the injured are being attended to. Are you venturing inside to create further chaos for the rescue team?"

Jenna's heart churned with conflicting emotions. She yearned to rush to the chemical plant to find her mother, yet she couldn't deny the logic in Lumian's words.

After Lumian pulled her back, she followed him with a vacant mind for a few paces. Then, her senses returned, and she sprinted toward église du Sifflet, not far from Rue Saint-Hilaire.

It stood as the grand cathedral of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Jenna had witnessed the rescued victims being carried there.

In a matter of seconds, she and Lumian arrived at the square outside the cathedral.

It was teeming with workers from Goodville Chemical Factory, groaning in agony. However, a significant number of them lay unconscious, and some no longer drew breath.

Doctors and nurses, clad in white coats, maneuvered through the crowd, feverishly providing first aid. They guided those deemed salvageable to a two-story carriage stationed at the square's periphery, adorned with various coats of arms or Sacred Emblems. From there, they transported them to several major hospitals in Quartier de No?l.

Jenna's body involuntarily quivered as her gaze swept over the lifeless bodies and injured individuals, fearing what she might witness.

Lumian seized her arm and guided her across the square, in search of Elodie.

The gas lamps lining the square cast a rudimentary glow, granting them a modicum of illumination.

After a few minutes, Lumian's keen Hunter eyesight detected a wounded figure whom he suspected to be Elodie.

Upon receiving the news, Jenna dashed over, crouched down, and studied the unconscious person's face.

The injured individual's golden wig had mostly been singed away, exposing her flaxen hair, now blackened by the flames.

Her eyes, adorned with smudged eye shadow, remained tightly shut, her countenance marred by soot. Burns covered her body, and her lips bore an unnatural blue tinge. It was none other than Elodie, the cleaner at Auberge du Coq Doré—Jenna's mother.

"Mom! Mom!" Jenna's strength evaporated, and she crumpled beside Elodie.

Realizing her mother's unconscious state, occasionally punctuated by twitches, Jenna abruptly rose to her feet and muttered to herself, "We need a doctor. We must get her to a hospital without delay!"

Having confirmed the victim's identity, Lumian focused on assessing Elodie's luck and deduced that it was dire. Even if she were swiftly transported to the hospital, her chances of survival seemed slim.

Swiftly, he seized Jenna and spoke in a solemn tone, "Help me shield her from prying eyes."

Jenna regarded him with astonishment. Infused with his composed demeanor, she turned her body to block the area on Elodie's left side.

"I possess a healing agent from mysticism. Let us first test its efficacy," Lumian explained in a hushed tone as he circled around to Elodie's right side, his back

serving as a barrier for her other flank.

A healing agent from mysticism… Jenna's eyes sparkled, a glimmer of hope illuminating her face.

Intently, Jenna watched as Lumian produced an iron-colored metal canister, unscrewed the cap, and poured its contents into her mother's mouth.

After more than ten seconds, Elodie appeared to regain some consciousness and swallowed the curative liquid.

Observing this, Jenna felt a slight wave of relief wash over her. She instinctively sensed that her mother's condition had improved marginally.

Time seemed to stretch unbearably, suffocating her. A minute felt like an eternity.

Finally, she witnessed the burns on Elodie's body start to heal at an astonishing pace, and the bluish tint on her lips gradually faded.

Jenna looked up at Lumian, her astonishment palpable.

Countless words clamored to escape her lips, but they remained lodged there, unable to form coherent utterances.

Lumian met her gaze and nodded. He whispered, "This agent works wonders in treating external injuries and alleviating ailments caused by chemical fumes. It can transform near-fatal wounds into severe injuries, severe injuries into minor ones, and minor injuries into complete recovery.

"Your mother suffered severe injuries earlier. For now, her life is no longer in immediate danger. However, she will require extensive treatment in the days to come. Otherwise, her condition may deteriorate."

Upon hearing the words "no longer in immediate danger," Jenna's vision blurred.

She had suppressed her tears, determined not to let them hinder her search and her mother's treatment.

But now, tears streamed down her face. She raised her hands, clumsily wiping them away, and muttered incoherently, "Thank you… Thank you…"

Amidst her words, distant cries reached their ears.

Relatives of the deceased had arrived.

Just as Lumian was about to offer a jest to lighten the mood, a muffled thunder resounded in the air.

Rumble!

Instinctively, Lumian looked up and beheld a thick dark cloud looming over Rue Saint-Hilaire, where flames still flickered and explosions echoed.

The cloud wasn't expansive, enshrouding only a few streets.

Silver-white lightning streaked across the sky, accompanied by muted thunderclaps that reverberated through everyone's hearts.

Torrential rain poured down, concentrated over Rue Saint-Hilaire and Goodville Chemical Factory.

The grayish-black smoke tinged with yellow swiftly dissipated, settling to the ground. The flames were swiftly extinguished, and no further explosions occurred.

As swiftly as it had arrived, the storm dissipated. The dark clouds dispersed, and the setting sun on the horizon cast a fiery glow.

Within the golden-red light, a behemoth soared above Rue Saint-Hilaire.

It was a dark gray airship, its elongated and circular balloon emitting a loud buzzing sound.

At the rear of the hull, paddlewheels spun frenziedly, while numerous cannon muzzles and bomb ports adorned its surface. At that moment, a translucent turquoise liquid rained down upon Goodville Chemical Factory below.

The acrid stench in the air began to subside.

Are the authorities resolving the catastrophe? The dark clouds, the lightning, and the rain didn't seem natural. Could they be the work of a Beyonder or Sealed Artifact? It almost resembled the handiwork of a deity… Lumian withdrew his gaze, a tinge of astonishment in his eyes.

Jenna had also witnessed what had just happened, but her focus remained fixed on her mother's injuries, not dwelling too deeply on what had transpired.

Elodie's burns had mostly healed, leaving behind only a few charred remnants. Her breathing had stabilized, and although her lips remained pale, it didn't seem to cause much concern to those around.

The curative agent had taken full effect, bringing stability to her condition.

Jenna closed her eyes and absentmindedly wiped her face.

At that moment, a voice nearby called out, "Celia!"

Jenna glanced to the side and waved her hand. "Julien, over here!"

A young man, standing nearly 1.75 meters tall, swiftly made his way to Elodie's side. Clad in a grayish-blue worker's uniform, he had flaxen-colored hair and eyes

that mirrored Jenna's blue hues. His features were rather pleasing to the eye.

He looked at Elodie with concern and asked hurriedly, "How's Mom?"

Jenna pursed her lips and replied, "She sustained serious injuries, but she'll pull through."

Relief washed over Julien, who then cast a curious glance at Jenna.

"Why are you dressed like that… And who is he?"

Only then did Jenna realize she was wearing a rose-colored gown. Hastily, she explained, "I came straight from the theater. This is my friend, Ciel. He has been a great help."

"Thank you," Julien sincerely expressed his gratitude to Lumian.

Lumian nodded and advised, "Fetch a doctor and arrange for a carriage to take her to the hospital immediately. Otherwise, her condition may worsen."

"Alright." Julien dashed off to find the nearest doctor and nurse.

Lumian turned to Jenna and said, "If you can't secure a carriage promptly, hire one yourself."

Jenna nodded, her gaze filled with gentle concern as she looked at her unconscious mother. She whispered, "I owe you my gratitude this time…"

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Chapter 240 - 240 Bewitchment

240 Bewitchment

Lumian cast a contemplative gaze at Jenna, his lips forming a tight line.

“You lack the awareness of an Assassin and the understanding that you’ve stepped into the realm of mysticism. Had you possessed such insight, you might have joined mystical gatherings through Franca and procured valuable resources in the past month or two. Though they may not rival the potency of my healing agent, it would have been a proactive step instead of watching your mother’s condition deteriorate.”

Jenna, instead of erupting in a fit of humiliation and resorting to vulgar retorts, remained silent for a few moments before curtly acknowledging his words.

This response left Lumian at a loss. He clicked his tongue and spoke again.

“Of course, considering your financial constraints and the weight of debts and tuition fees, even if you were to participate in these mysticism gatherings, you wouldn’t be able to afford much. It would be more of an opportunity to earn money or valuable items by accepting commissions.”

Just then, Jenna’s brother, Julien, arrived with a doctor and two nurses.

The doctor glanced at Elodie with a puzzled expression and inquired, “I recall that there was no need to resuscitate her…”

“You remembered incorrectly,” Lumian calmly interjected.

The doctor, overwhelmed by the influx of injured patients, had his memories tangled and disorganized. Upon hearing Lumian’s remark, he assumed he must have mistaken the person. Consequently, he swiftly tended to Elodie’s remaining external injuries and arranged for her to be carried into the carriage, awaiting transportation to the hospital.

…

Connected to Quartier de No?l and the bustling market district, stood Passy Bridge, one of the five bridges that stretched over the mighty Srenzo River in the city of Trier.

Nestled beside Passy Bridge was the Holy Palace Hospital, generously funded by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. Elodie, a devout follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, had been admitted to this renowned establishment. Placed on the top floor of

the white six-story building, she shared a ward with five other patients.

Jenna watched as doctors and nurses meticulously drew blood, conducted examinations, and administered intravenous drips. A soft sigh escaped her lips.

“The hospital has undergone quite a transformation in the past few years…”

“Oh?” Lumian was puzzled.

Jenna’s expression darkened as she replied, “A few years ago, when my father and the others were brought to the hospital, the more severe cases were immediately taken to the operating room. Those with lesser injuries were simply bandaged and given medication to gauge its effectiveness. There was no blood being drawn, and the examinations were rudimentary. It’s completely different now. The entire process seems to have changed.”

“That’s a good thing.” Lumian nodded.

It looked more professional.

As the two spoke in hushed tones, Jenna’s brother, Julien, diligently assisted the doctors and nurses. He answered inquiries about the patients’ normal physical conditions, aided in moving IV stands, and was dispatched to the pharmacy as needed.

However, even after the medical professionals in their white coats had concluded their tasks, he had yet to return.

The doctor overseeing Elodie’s care approached Jenna, holding a writing board, and observed her rose-colored gown. His expression softened.

“Is Elodie your mother?” he inquired.

“Yes,” Jenna confirmed with a nod.

The male doctor pondered for a moment before speaking, “Your mother’s condition is better than I anticipated. It seems surgery may not be necessary at this time. Of course, this assessment is preliminary and contingent upon the results of the tests we conducted.

“That’s some good news. On the other hand, your mother has suffered severe burns. She may need to remain hospitalized for months, half a year, or even longer. Even if she recovers, she will likely be in a weakened state.

“The Church’s philanthropic foundation will cover the initial two days of treatment. The remaining expenses will be deducted once the accident insurance from the factory is settled. However, you must be prepared to bear the subsequent costs yourself. It won’t be a small sum. I must caution you not to have excessive expectations of the accident insurance. From my experience, it typically takes an average of three to five years to obtain compensation. You must understand that our Intis laws tend to favor factory owners and bankers in order to protect their

interests."

Jenna didn't hesitate for a moment.

"I will ensure my mother's full recovery."

Jenna had already contemplated the possibility of borrowing money from both Franca and Lumian if she found herself in need of a substantial sum. She was willing to repay them in installments at a later date. Whether it meant making monthly or weekly payments for the treatment, she was prepared to cut back and save, reducing her previous debt payments, while also relying on her income as a part-time underground singer.

However, this meant that her plan to remain an underground singer for just one year, as she had initially intended, would need to be extended. It seemed she might have to continue as an underground singer for two, or even three, years.

The doctor briefly assessed Jenna's appearance and attire before giving her the necessary instructions.

"Take this form and make a payment of 200 verl d'or at the payment counter on the first floor."

200… Jenna breathed a sigh of relief. She signed the form under her real name, Celia Bello, and took it with her as she descended the stairs.

On her way down, she glanced at Lumian, who was by her side, and hesitated before speaking.

"I-if I ever find myself in need of a large sum for medical fees in the future, I think I would like to borrow from you."

Jenna had always been a stubborn individual with her own principles. In the past, when she worked tirelessly to earn money in various dance halls within the market district, the thought of borrowing from Franca or asking for her help in securing an easy and lucrative part-time job had never crossed her mind. But now, for the sake of her mother, Elodie, she was willing to let go of her stubbornness in this regard.

Although Lumian had already "squandered" more than 700 verl d'or on himself and received an advance from the proceeds he could obtain from Salle de Bal Brise, he showed no signs of concern. He replied nonchalantly, "Okay."

Jenna regarded him suspiciously.

"I thought you might hesitate for a moment. Franca mentioned that you needed a significant sum of money for something important."

Lumian chuckled.

"That's for advancing and purchasing the main ingredient for Pyromaniac. However, it doesn't prevent me from lending you money. As a Beyonder and the

leader of the Savoie Mob, even if I don't have a coppet at the moment, I can assist you in acquiring the necessary funds.

"The simplest solution would be to have René sign a long-term contract with you, advancing you 10,000 verl d'or. Then, 50% of your income from the dance hall will be deducted each day to repay the loan in installments. Once it's fully repaid, the contract will naturally be terminated."

Jenna fell silent for a moment, realizing that something that had deeply troubled her was easily resolved in Ciel's presence.

Lumian glanced at her and smirked.

"As an Assassin, you shouldn't fret about medical expenses like these. If you aim to advance in the future, you'll need tens of thousands in funds.

"You need to change your mindset now. Don't hold the law in such high regard. As you heard earlier, Intis's laws don't protect the poor. We can only protect ourselves.

"Once you've come to terms with this, we'll kidnap the former factory owner and extract enough cash from him. After the verdict is announced and he pays the compensation for your father's accident, you can donate the money to someone in need.

"As long as we execute it cleanly, combined with Franca's anti-divination measures, the likelihood of success is exceedingly high. It won't leave a trace behind. It's improbable for a factory owner like him to have Beyonder bodyguards."

Jenna's heart raced at his words. She hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"It just doesn't sit right with me…

"Dammit, are you the Instigator, or will I become the Instigator? How are you so adept at bewitching people?

"Eventually, you'll have to face the consequences of breaking the law, won't you?"

Lumian smirked once again.

"I didn't finish. We only do what's necessary. We can't act recklessly. Not only would it bring danger, but it could also increase the risk of losing control. Kidnapping the factory owner is to reclaim the compensation your family deserves."

Jenna fell silent once more.

Realizing they were about to reach the first floor, she hurriedly said, "I need to use the washroom."

By the time she emerged from the washroom, she had a stack of 200 verl d'or notes in her hand.

Seeing Jenna pay the initial treatment fee, Lumian glanced at her rose-colored gown and commented,

"You can't tend to a patient dressed like this. I'll return to the dance hall and fetch your clothes. I'll also help you secure some time off.

"If your mother's condition worsens, come to me or Franca immediately."

Having just examined Elodie's luck and confirmed that her condition was no longer critical, though still uncertain of improvement, Lumian found it somewhat chaotic. It might have been dependent on the hospital's treatment effectiveness.

"Okay." Jenna pursed her lips and nodded.

…

On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.

Just as Lumian was about to inform Manager René about Jenna and ask him to reschedule tonight's performance, Louis approached him.

Louis cast a quick glance around and lowered his voice.

"Boss, about half an hour ago, Boss sent someone to deliver a bag of items to the financial safe. He said it was for you."

Something from Boss… Supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion? As expected of a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway… Lumian nodded slightly, pleased, and passed through the café, entering the second-floor corridor.

Upon opening the safe, he felt a burning sensation.

Inside the grayish-white cloth bag were three glass bottles. One contained bubbling crimson blood, from which flames burst with each bubble. Another held blood-colored powder at the bottom, while the third contained a finger-sized stone emitting a red fluorescent light.

Fire Salamander blood, Redcrown Balsam powder, Magma Pyroxene… Indeed, supplementary Pyromaniac ingredients… Lumian picked up the items, satisfied.

…

3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, outside Apartment 601.

Lumian, having left Salle de Bal Brise, headed straight to Franca's place. He intended to borrow 4,000 verl d'or, using his share of the Harvest Sacrifice as collateral.

Upon opening the door and seeing Lumian, Franca clicked her tongue and remarked, “Did you hear? There was an explosion at a factory in the southern part of the market district. Numerous incidents have been occurring in the market district lately, giving me the sense that a storm is brewing.”

Upon hearing this, Lumian instantly recalled something.

He spoke in a deep voice, “There was an accident at the Goodville Chemical Factory. This morning, the owner of the factory paid a visit to the member of parliament’s office.”

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Chapter 241 - 241 Indomitable Spirit

241 Indomitable Spirit

After hearing Lumian's words, Franca exclaimed, "Dammit! Are we dealing with those lot again? What's Hugues Artois up to?"

"I can't quite fathom the purpose behind causing a chemical plant explosion either… Maybe it's just a coincidence. Bono Goodville and Hugues Artois have quite a good relationship. It's not unusual for him to pay a visit, but it just so happens that there was an explosion at the chemical plant today," Lumian pondered before speaking.

He couldn't dismiss every coincidence in life, but he also couldn't treat each one as a problem.

Franca nodded thoughtfully and remarked, "True enough.

"However, I must remind you that the chemical plant explosion isn't meaningless. It may have already resulted in numerous deaths, and that holds great significance for certain dark rituals. The living are always the third-best sacrifice."

"Could this also be part of a ritual?" Lumian was somewhat taken aback.

Franca corrected him, "There's no real distinction between using a knife to sacrifice someone and using a chemical plant explosion to kill the intended victim as part of a ritual for the deity the host desires to invoke. Your understanding of ritualistic magic is still too narrow. Some rituals may indeed require such explosions to be effective."

It's akin to the Substitution Spell, requiring a substitute to assume the identity to be replaced for an extended period before the ritual. Lumian grasped the idea.

Franca let out a sigh.

"This is merely my conjecture. It doesn't necessarily mean it's true. However, we must alert the official Beyonders to be vigilant for signs of a ritual and to investigate the role of the member of parliament's office in this catastrophe.

"F*ck, if that bloke wasn't a member of parliament, I'd have captured him tonight, strung him up from the ceiling, and given him a thrashing. I'd interrogate him about his intentions and his connection to those heretics.

"Sigh, in that explosion just now, countless individuals lost their parents, spouses, siblings, or children. I wonder how many people are praying, worrying, and

suffering for their injured loved ones."

"Like Jenna," Lumian interjected.

Franca was momentarily stunned. "What did you say?"

"Jenna's mother works at the Goodville Chemical Factory. Didn't you know?" Lumian inquired.

Franca was taken aback before asking with concern, "How is her mother?"

Lumian briefly recounted how he had accompanied Jenna to Rue Saint-Hilaire in search of Elodie and had used the last bit of healing agent to save her from near death.

Franca let out a sigh of relief and expressed in anguish, "Why wasn't I there! Why wasn't I there!"

Lumian's lips twitched as he calmly said, "You still have a chance. Jenna is fretting over the subsequent medical expenses."

"I'll go to the Holy Palace Hospital right away!" Franca's eyes lit up, and she was about to dash out of the apartment.

Lumian hastily called out to her, "Don't forget to bring the Poison Spur Mob's healing agent with you. I'm concerned that her condition might worsen."

Just like Monsieur Ruhr.

Without waiting for Franca's response, he added, "Also, help Jenna bring the dress she wore this morning."

"Right… I need to borrow 4,000 verl d'or from you and offer half of the Harvest Sacrifice as collateral. I've already gathered the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion."

"So soon?" Franca exclaimed, taken aback. "I haven't even begun searching for you!"

Lumian smirked once again.

"Last night, I ran into Boss at the entrance of the member of parliament's office and confessed my plans to advance and about the advance on my pay. I requested he keep an eye on the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion."

The more Franca listened, the more complicated her expression became.

"You're more cunning than I realized, kid… Confiding in Gardner about this matter is indeed the best approach.

“However, can’t you consider me? Don’t you know that I also wanted to help you gather the supplementary ingredients for the Pyromaniac potion through Gardner? He’s a Sequence 6 Conspirer or a Sequence 5 Hunter, and he has a group of Hunters working with him. He won’t be lacking in such things. Luckily, I haven’t approached him in the past two days. Otherwise, he would have surely suspected that we were having an affair.”

Lumian had always assumed Franca would seek materials through the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. He hadn’t expected her to approach Gardner Martin out of convenience and proximity, almost exposing their secret relationship.

Franca returned to her room and retrieved a banknote worth 4,000 verl d’or from somewhere. She handed it to Lumian and solemnly reminded him, “Once you obtain the main ingredient, don’t rush to concoct the potion. You must ensure that your condition can withstand the impact of your advancement. Otherwise, it’s best to delay it for a while. The main ingredient is much easier to preserve than the potion itself.”

“I’m well aware,” Lumian replied calmly.

After a moment of thought, he asked, “Before you go to Jenna, it would be wise to inform the authorities. The explosion just happened, so there might be some clues left behind.”

“Yes,” Franca agreed.

Before bidding farewell, Lumian asked curiously, “If the living are the third-best sacrifice, what are the second-best and the best?”

“The second-best are beings with Beyonder characteristics. And the best…” Franca smiled. “They are demigods.”

…

Quartier de No?l, sixth floor of Holy Palace Hospital.

As Jenna returned to the ward from the washroom, she spotted her brother Julien assisting their mother, Elodie, in tucking the corners of the blanket.

Elodie remained unconscious, but her complexion showed signs of improvement.

Julien stood up and beckoned his sister to the side. He whispered, “Celia, don’t fret about the upcoming medical expenses. I’ll find a solution. Keep attending your acting lessons at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.”

Jenna’s heart swelled with gratitude as she inquired, “Did the doctor talk to you?”

“Yes, he just did.” Julien nodded with solemnity.

Jenna pressed her lips together and assured him, “Don’t worry. My friends have agreed to lend me money. I can repay them over three years with minimal interest. With my earnings as an underground singer and your wages, if we are frugal, it should be enough without affecting our respective apprenticeships.”

There was a moment of silence as Julien pondered, before he finally spoke, “That Ciel?”

“Yes, he’s one of them, but I have other friends too. And Franca, the ‘Red Boots’ I mentioned last night.” Jenna felt the need to clarify the situation, fearing her brother might resort to extreme measures.

She recalled how two years ago, Julien had contemplated secretly selling himself to Balam-Paz Import and Export Corporation, unbeknownst to their mother, in order to become a disposable mercenary and repay all their debts, allowing Jenna to pursue her dreams as an apprentice actress. Fortunately, that plan had been thwarted in the end.

Just as Julien was about to respond, his gaze fell upon a tall, slender woman standing at the ward’s entrance.

She donned a blouse, light-colored breeches, a thin black-on-white checkered tweed top, and vibrant red boots. Her long flaxen-colored hair was tied back in a simple ponytail. With eyebrows that extended toward her temples and eyes that sparkled with energy, she exuded an irresistible charm.

Jenna eagerly approached her.

“Franca.”

…

Rue des Blouses Blanches, inside the safe house.

Lumian, having acquired Sun Star and currently distilling its extract, took a seat and awaited Madam Magician’s response.

On the desk in front of him, Fire Salamander blood, Magma Pyroxene powder, and Redcrown Balsam powder were neatly arranged.

Just as the Sun Star extract was about to be completed, the arm-height “doll” dressed in a light-gold gown, with exquisite yet slightly peculiar facial features, appeared on the windowsill.

It placed a metal biscuit tin on the windowsill and sniffed the air.

“Use this extract the next time you summon me.”

“Alright.” The request from the other party was so unusual that Lumian was momentarily taken aback. His instinctive response was the only thing he could

offer.

In an instant, the puppet messenger vanished before his eyes. Lumian opened the bright silver biscuit tin and beheld the small crimson “heart” burning silently within.

Without hesitation, he grabbed a prepared beer mug and dropped in the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic.

Immediately afterward, Lumian poured over 50 milliliters of Fire Salamander blood into the cup.

With a sizzling sound, the crimson liquid evaporated, transforming into a mist of blood that swirled around the “heart.”

The Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic softened considerably, its surface rippling like the water of a lake.

Following the potion formula’s instructions, Lumian added Magma Pyroxene powder, Redcrown Balsam powder, and Sun Star extract into the beer mug. As he did so, the blood mist surrounding the “heart” abruptly shrank, giving rise to a yellowish liquid with red bubbles.

In Lumian’s eyes, this was the Pyromaniac potion.

Rather than consuming it immediately, Lumian closed his eyes.

In his mind, he conjured images of Flameng’s lifeless body dangling from a window frame, the lunatic’s will inscribed on a sheet of white paper. He envisioned Monsieur Ruhr, his body ravaged by decay. He pictured Madame Michel, drowning her sorrows in drink and singing boisterously, only to ultimately meet her demise by hanging herself in the morning light. He also saw the cries that echoed through Sifflet Square.

Then, he glimpsed his own stubborn and determined self as a wanderer. He witnessed his unwavering spirit, refusing to surrender despite the repeated blows. He envisioned an alternative outcome for himself. He witnessed the sorrow, anger, powerlessness, and oppression that came with pursuing hope, only to be engulfed by darkness.

The mocking laughter of fate resounded in his ears, igniting a raging fire within his heart.

If this is the unavoidable conclusion;

If this is the fate of insignificance,

If efforts yield no fruit, and hope remains forever out of reach;

Then I shall fight with every ounce of my being to change it all!

Even if there is no light ahead, and hope dwindles to a mere flicker, I will fight until my last breath!

Motherf*cker member of parliament!

Motherf*cker Guillaume Bénet!

Motherf*cker heretics!

Motherf*cker Termiboros!

Motherf*cker Inevitability!

Lumian's eyes snapped open as he solidified his final acting principle as a Provoker.

Provocation symbolized indomitable spirit!

He didn't need this for digestion assistance. With a fire raging within his chest, he seized the beer mug and guzzled down the liquid.

It burned from his mouth, down his esophagus, into his stomach, and seared into his heart.

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Chapter 242 - 242 Pyromaniac

242 Pyromaniac

Instantaneously, Lumian felt an inferno raging within him. The scorching agony seared through his body and soul, engulfing him completely. This sensation was not alien to him. Whether it was the dire wounds inflicted during his pursuit of the flaming monster or the brink of losing control while receiving a boon, all had set him ablaze.

In this very moment, the tormenting fire failed to extinguish the blazing determination in his heart. He defied destiny, yearning to alter the course of events, to incinerate the oppressive flames of despair and desolation.

Instead of succumbing to the pain and collapsing to the ground, Lumian remained upright. Clenching his teeth and contorting his face, he refused to bow down.

Gradually, the agony became unbearable, and his body began to bend. Nevertheless, Lumian mustered all his strength to straighten his back, just as he had confronted Guillaume Bénet, the padre, and Termiboros, who had unleashed a cataclysmic calamity upon Cordu.

Step by step, he lowered his body and raised it again. The scent of singed flesh filled his nostrils, and the voice from infinity reverberated in his ears.

A familiar, excruciating pain pierced his skull, eliciting an involuntary cry. Cracks formed on his skin, and molten liquid akin to lava coursed beneath.

Desperately, Lumian leaned on the desk before him, seeking support.

The spot he touched promptly blackened and charred, permeating the air with the scent of burning timber.

His instinctive scream was stifled. His mouth hung open, expelling searing gas.

Instead of immediately uncorking the vial of gray amber perfume, he relied on the fire within his chest to combat the mounting anguish and the increasingly hazy thoughts welling up from within.

Seconds ticked away. Lumian, with gritted teeth, sensed the flames within his chest surging forth, mingling with the inferno raging throughout his being.

Gradually, the manifold pains subsided, and his muddled thoughts gradually cleared.

Using his hands as support, Lumian hoisted himself up and directed his gaze towards the full-length mirror in the room.

Reflected in the looking glass, his blond locks retained a tinge of black, his attire reduced to tatters. His body bore scorch marks that swiftly scabbed over and fell to the floor, revealing his fair complexion.

Simultaneously, Lumian beheld two crimson flames ablaze within his blue eyes. It was only after striving to regain composure and still his racing heart that the flames gradually dissipated.

In the next second, In the next heartbeat, Lumian raised his right hand, manifesting a crimson flame in his palm.

He had triumphantly ascended to the Sequence 7 of the Hunter's path, emerging as a Pyromaniac!

From his palm, flames surged, intertwining with the original crimson hue, constantly compressing.

After a span of more than ten seconds, the fiery crimson transformed into an incandescent white. The temperature and explosive force it contained surged to greater heights.

I can wield the crimson flame directly or, by accumulating and compressing it for a duration, unleash an even more scorching white-hot blaze… Lumian's palm appeared impervious to the scorching heat as he allowed the white-hot flame to silently burn.

Having already conducted a preliminary assessment of his condition and the mystical knowledge he had acquired, Lumian had gained a fairly comprehensive understanding of the superpowers bestowed upon a Pyromaniac.

First and foremost, a Pyromaniac's spirituality had seen a remarkable improvement, leading to a transformative shift in Lumian's Spirit Vision. No longer confined to a chaotic spectacle, he now possessed the ability to employ a more discreet and expeditious activation method. Moreover, he could finally perceive the hues and shades his sister had described, discerning the various components of the Ether Body.

This newfound insight proved invaluable to a Hunter, enabling Lumian to better grasp an adversary's physical state and thereby target them with greater precision.

Secondly, his instinct for danger had undergone significant enhancement. Gone were the days when he only sensed trouble at the very brink of eruption. Through careful observation of his surroundings and the assimilation of information, Lumian could now activate his intuition preemptively. Consequently, he could detect if he was being followed and employ his anti-tracking techniques more effectively and flawlessly.

Thirdly, his command over flames had brought with it a handful of accompanying spells.

At present, Lumian's primary ability involved controlling the flames that originated from within him or were conjured by his own hands. While he possessed an affinity for flames and combustible substances in his vicinity, his influence over them remained somewhat limited. It was possible that, upon digesting the Pyromaniac potion or advancing to a higher Sequence, corresponding changes might occur.

Furthermore, Lumian could employ the flames he created as weapons against his adversaries. However, once the flames left his body, they no longer fell under his dominion unless he had pre-invested a portion of his spirituality in them.

In essence, altering the trajectory of a fireball in mid-flight proved to be quite challenging, necessitating a supplementary expenditure of spirituality.

The control of flames could be categorized into seven distinct aspects:

Firstly, there was compression—a bombardment in the form of a fireball. The longer the compression lasted, the more flames gathered, resulting in a more potent strike.

Secondly, Lumian could ignite a layer of flames over his body, affording him a measure of defense against freezing effects, poisonous gases, and other forms of assault.

Thirdly, he could fashion various temporary weapons using flames, capable of inflicting scorching, cutting, and piercing damage. Depending on the time spent channeling the flames, this ability could be categorized as either crimson or blazing-white.

Fourthly, Lumian had mastered the art of delayed explosions. By employing additional spirituality and manipulating the structure, he could fashion a Flame Bomb that would detonate at a predetermined time, rather than immediately upon impact.

Fifthly, he possessed the power of area-of-effect attacks. By extending the reach of the flames instead of hurling them forth, Lumian could ensure precise control over their detonation, causing them to erupt at a desired location or manifest in different forms.

Sixthly, Lumian had honed the technique of Fire Infusion. Through close-quarters combat and the forceful clash of strength, he could gradually inject flames into an opponent's body before triggering their detonation.

Finally, the seventh aspect involved imbuing his weapon with fire damage.

The fire-type spells Lumian had acquired were instrumental in these various aspects, leveraging certain techniques to achieve effects that he could not

ordinarily produce.

The spells at Lumian's disposal were as follows: Fire Raven, Blazing Spear, Wall of Fire, and Giant Fireball.

Of them all, the Fire Raven spell stood out as the most enchanting. With its aid, Lumian could swiftly condense a flock of flaming ravens around him, bestowing a fraction of his spirituality upon each avian form. This granted him a degree of control even after they departed from his body, enabling them to momentarily adjust their flight path and lock onto their intended targets.

Without this spell, Lumian, a recent convert to Pyromaniac, would need to expend at least three times his present store of spirituality and energy to achieve a similar outcome. Moreover, the Fire Ravens would possess a significantly more clumsy and rigid disposition.

Blazing Spear, on the other hand, entailed the rapid condensation of white flames, though they could only maintain the shape of a spear. Infused with spirituality, they could roughly guide Lumian's created fireball.

By utilizing the ground as a conduit and drawing upon its own essence, Wall of Fire summoned forth a pair of flaming serpents that slithered toward the enemy, erecting a scorching barrier around them.

Giant Fireball demanded a span of ten to twenty seconds, akin to the compression of numerous crimson fireballs into a single devastating blast.

While the Pyromaniac's flames originated from his physical form and primarily inflicted bodily harm, they were also capable of burning a Spirit Body. Lumian was no longer defenseless against creatures of a soul-like nature, though he still relied on external assistance.

Additionally, the potion's modifications had bestowed upon his body a remarkable resistance to flames. Even if doused in animal fat and subjected to the flames of a torch for half a day, the damage he suffered would be minimal. Nevertheless, the concussive force of a fireball's explosion could still harm him in a conventional manner.

Lumian held the belief that as he advanced to higher Sequences, his body might even merge with fire itself.

With a casual flick of his right hand, the blazing white flame dissipated into the air.

Then, with a firm grip, he summoned a longsword crafted from crimson flames, materializing it from thin air.

Lumian brandished the fiery blade a few times, his disappointment evident. He muttered silently to himself, It possesses the ability to harm the enemy, but it cannot block or parry…

The flaming sword lacked a tangible form. Lumian surmised that he would need to reach a higher Sequence before he could turn such a weapon corporeal.

He dismissed the flaming longsword and drew Hedsey's dagger.

As his fingers caressed the dagger's surface, a fiery blaze enveloped the blade.

Lumian tightened his grip on the hilt and executed a few thrusts with the dagger. He observed the rapid dissipation of red sparks in the air, creating an ethereal spectacle.

It can block and deal fire damage. Though it may lack scorching temperatures in this form, it remains highly useful.

The current problem lies in the fact that ordinary weapons cannot endure exposure to flames for long… Lumian pondered, nodding approvingly.

Having confirmed his Beyonder powers as a Pyromaniac, he swiftly organized his desk and donned a linen shirt, a brown jacket, and dark trousers.

Lumian cast a final glance at his reflection in the mirror, a smile curling upon his lips.

He placed the dark-blue cap upon his head, turned on his heel, and strode purposefully toward the door.

Crimson flames silently erupted in his wake, an ephemeral and blinding display.

…

On Avenue du Marché, outside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the member of parliament's office,

Lumian once again found himself seated among the destitute at the alley opposite, quietly observing the steady flow of people entering and exiting the targeted establishment.

In the wake of the explosion at Goodville Chemical Factory, countless workers had tragically lost their lives, leaving many more injured. The entire city of Trier was abuzz with news reporters flocking to the scene. As a result, Hugues Artois's office remained aglow with gas-powered wall lamps, as his staff tirelessly attended to visitors with varied intentions.

The member of parliament had yet to return home, and his entourage naturally remained within the khaki-colored building. Every room seemed to radiate with illumination, brimming with activity.

Leaning against the wall of the street, Lumian observed the comings and goings within the member of parliament's office, his mind churning with contemplation.

He yearned to ignite a “fire”!

He yearned to “incinerate” the despicable scoundrel responsible for spreading disease!

He was fully aware of the dire consequences that awaited him. As a Pyromaniac, he understood that he alone was not yet strong enough to face off against the evil god’s Blessed who surrounded Hugues Artois.

Yet, he simply longed to take action. He couldn’t shake the feeling that no matter how fierce a conflagration may be, it all started with a single spark.

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Chapter 243 - 243 Visit

243 Visit

Lumian's fury did not mean he would lose his composure—to just disguise himself and sneak into the member of parliament's office, where he would find the fellow who had dared to "casually spit" and incinerate him on the spot.

It wasn't a ridiculous scheme, but without enough information, taking such a risk could easily turn into suicide.

First and foremost, Lumian had no knowledge of the number or strength of the heretics present in the member of parliament's office.

He also had no idea how many protectors Bureau 8 or the two Churches had assigned to Hugues Artois, nor did he know their abilities.

Furthermore, he lacked precise details about the target's whereabouts or situation. Even if he managed to infiltrate the office successfully, finding the target would be no easy task.

Lastly, he hadn't yet devised a plan for sneaking in and, more importantly, a plan for a safe retreat.

Nevertheless, Lumian couldn't deny that the chaos caused by the Goodville Chemical Factory explosion provided an excellent opportunity for his infiltration.

For now, his temporary strategy was to be a patient hunter. He would trail the target silently, observing his movements and waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Based on the target's status in Hugo Artois's campaign, Lumian surmised that the man couldn't be too powerful. He certainly didn't possess godlike abilities. Even if he were a Mid-Sequence Beyonder, he would likely be no higher than a Sequence 7.

Lumian wasn't overly concerned if his judgment was wrong and the target turned out to be a Sequence 6 or even Sequence 5. In fact, he believed that Mr. K would find the hunt for heretics quite intriguing!

Phew… Lumian breathed out slowly, his gaze fixed on the brightly illuminated khaki-colored four-story building. He continued to gather useful information for his upcoming operation.

As time passed, he noticed middle-aged scavengers carrying linen bags, sifting through the trash piled beside the building.

This sight made Lumian sigh, fueling the fire of determination in his heart.

In Trier, people couldn't scavenge just for the sake of it. Each scavenger had an employer, whether they worked full-time or part-time. They were assigned specific scavenging areas and were not allowed to cross boundaries. Violations often led to conflicts and violent encounters. As a result, Ruhr and Michel wished fervently that Hugues Artois would host banquets every day instead of wandering into areas where banquets were already being held, as those spots belonged to other scavengers.

The difference between full-time and part-time scavengers lay in their employment terms. Full-timers received a monthly salary from their employers, and the employers owned all the trash they collected. Occasionally, if they stumbled upon valuable or usable items, they might decide whether to surrender them or keep them for personal use. Part-timers like Ruhr and Michel didn't have a fixed salary. They scavenged in the morning and evening, delivering everything they found to a designated waste disposal site, typically owned by their employers.

These circumstances restricted street tramps to scavenging for food and clothing, with little opportunity to exchange their findings for money.

Lumian patiently waited until 9 p.m., observing as the number of guests visiting the member of parliament's office gradually dwindled. People stepped out onto the balconies for a smoke or a brief respite.

And then, his eyes widened as he spotted a figure.

Standing on the balcony of a second-floor room, there he was—the thin, pale man with curly dark-yellow hair and piercing brown eyes.

Dressed in a blue shirt, black vest, and a somber suit, complete with a bow tie, he held a cigarette, enveloped in a cloud of smoke, occasionally taking a drag. Lumian had seen him before in Franca's Magic Mirror Divination. It was the spitter.

Cough, cough, cough! A fit of violent coughing shook the frail young man, as if he wished to expel his lungs from his body.

Finally, he hacked up another glob of thick phlegm after some harrumphing.

Pulling out a handkerchief, he spat the viscous phlegm into it, wrapping it up and tucking it away in his pocket. He didn't discard it carelessly.

Lumian's eyes narrowed. He knows that his phlegm can transmit diseases as a result of mysticism.

As more people flocked to the balconies of their respective rooms, Lumian swiftly identified the familiar faces.

Member of Parliament Hugues Artois from the market district occupied the room at the top floor, boasting the largest balcony.

The red-haired woman resided on the same floor, right next door to him.

On the second floor, on the opposite end of the corridor from the spitter, was a man in his thirties with gold-rimmed glasses, a document always in hand. Every now and then, he would wander to the balcony to enjoy a smoke and the view, displaying a lack of concern for the aftermath of the Goodville Chemical Factory explosion.

The third floor housed a tall, muscular middle-aged man, occupying the central office.

Directly beneath Hugues Artois, on the fourth floor, was a refined young woman in a white shirt and a dark-blue coat. She shared the same side of the building as the man with gold-rimmed glasses, deliberately avoiding any proximity to the spitter.

Lumian observed closely and deduced that the rooms adjacent to the spitter's were part of a collective office, likely accommodating several employees.

This implied that the probability of them holding any significant status or possessing Beyonder powers was negligible.

So, the other heretics intentionally distanced themselves from the incessant coughing and spitting man. They believe the member of parliament's office is heavily guarded, and that individual possesses Beyonder powers. It's highly unlikely for an attack to be directed at him. True enough. If an assault were to occur in the member of parliament's office, the target would undoubtedly be Hugues Artois and not one of his subordinates. Only then would it be worth the risk… Lumian pondered this realization earnestly for a moment and suddenly sensed an opportunity emerging.

The dilemma now lay in how Lumian could infiltrate the member of parliament's office unnoticed, particularly given his conspicuous golden hair with a touch of black. After all, he didn't have Franca's help.

After careful consideration, Lumian devised a plan.

He departed from the vicinity of the office and made his way back to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Without hesitation, he set up an altar and offered a prayer to the great existence, seeking His protection.

Lumian firmly believed that since the embrace of an angel would shield him from the prying eyes of any deity, it definitely ensured sufficient anti-divination effects!

Just as before, he found himself bathed in the radiant brilliance and divine majesty of the angel. Overwhelmed by indescribable emotions, he witnessed cascades of luminous wings enveloping him.

Once he completed this ritual, Lumian pressed his hand to his head.

His golden and black hair erupted into flames, cascading down like withered grass until only a few hair roots remained.

Putting on his trusty dark-blue cap, he concealed his features behind the Mystery Prying Glasses. With his transformed appearance, Lumian left Rue des Blouses Blanches and ventured towards Avenue du Marché near Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. There, he located a clothing store that didn't specialize in cheap garments.

The two shop assistants, a man and a woman, were taken aback when they saw a person dressed like a vagrant entering, unsure of how to react.

In a panicked tone, Lumian explained, "I encountered a perverted thief who stole my clothes and trousers. I had no choice but to purchase this set from a nearby beggar."

The female shop assistant struggled to suppress her laughter.

They had witnessed similar situations countless times before, well aware that those who made such excuses were often involved in affairs with certain ladies, fleeing in a state of undress with their wallets once their husbands returned, only to seek refuge in the garments of a beggar.

When someone confidently claimed that their predicament stemmed from an affair, it usually meant they had genuinely encountered a twisted thief.

In the end, Lumian acquired a suit that appeared decent but was actually quite ordinary. It included a shirt, coat, bow tie, and a dark cane. Additionally, he opted for a brown wig and a matching fake beard.

The total cost came to 78 verl d'or.

After carefully covering his tracks and returning to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian shed his disguise and once again adorned the Mystery Prying Glasses. Following his recollection, he skillfully applied makeup to achieve his desired effect.

His aim was to transform himself into an older version. As he gazed into the mirror, Lumian gradually took on the appearance of a middle-aged man, complete with a fake brown beard affixed to his mouth and chin.

Thus, Lumian assumed the identity of Bono Goodville, the proprietor of the Goodville Chemical Factory.

Though the resemblance was only around 40 to 50%, anyone acquainted with Bono Goodville would instinctively mistake Lumian for the man, provided they didn't scrutinize or closely distinguish him.

In this guise, Lumian intended to infiltrate the member of parliament's office!

Before embarking on his mission, he ventured into the underground and stashed the tramp's attire in a cavern within the quarry.

Emerging from Underground Trier, Lumian hastened to the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the member of parliament's office, cane in hand.

After observing for a brief moment and ensuring that the figures in each room remained relatively unchanged, he lowered his head, partially concealing his face, and approached the entrance.

"Whom are you seeking?" inquired an armed guard donned in a dark blue uniform, blocking his path.

Lumian raised his head, withdrew his hand, and responded with anxiety in his voice, "I'm looking for the member of parliament."

One of the guards caught a clear glimpse of the visitor's face under the glow of the street lamp and involuntarily exclaimed, "Monsieur Goodville, what brings you here again…"

Abruptly, he halted his words, realizing that this gentleman, who had recently experienced a devastating explosion at his factory, had an abundance of issues to address this night, along with numerous concerns that required assistance.

The two guards refrained from further inquiry and stepped aside, granting Lumian passage.

The lobby on the ground floor bustled with activity, despite the late hour. Reporters, officials, representatives of charitable organizations, hospital staff reporting in, and various personnel responsible for receiving them filled the space.

Lumian preserved his desire to remain inconspicuous. With his head lowered, partially obscuring his face, he proceeded directly to the staircase. Employing the same tactic, he passed by the two armed guards and ascended to the second floor.

Orienting himself, Lumian bypassed the two employees who emerged from a nearby room and arrived in front of the office belonging to the unhealthy young man.

Embedded on the vermilion door was an aluminum-white nameplate inscribed with a few golden Intisian words: "Assistant Secretary, Tybalt Jacques."

Tybalt… Lumian smiled, donned his gloves, and tapped lightly on the door.

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Chapter 244 - 244 Red and Black

244 Red and Black

Knock, knock, knock.

The office reverberated with an urgent knock.

A feeble and disinterested voice floated through the air.

“Come in, please.”

Lumian turned the doorknob and pushed open the vibrant vermilion door. Before him stood a frail, gaunt young man.

Dressed in a blue shirt, black waistcoat, and somber suit, he stood by the expansive desk, his eyes fixed on the door.

As Tybalt Jacques recognized the visitor to be Bono Goodville, a chuckle escaped the assistant secretary.

“Don’t fret. Decay is an unavoidable fate. It afflicts humans and organizations alike. Once the decay sets in, all sorts of troubles will arise…”

Before Tybalt could conclude, he saw Lumian approach. Guard raised, he blurted out,”What do you think you’re doing…”

Bam! Lumian threw a punch, accompanied by a blazing crimson flame.

His action cut off Tybalt’s words, forcing him to instinctively raise his forearm to block the blow.

Flames flickered, consuming Tybalt’s sleeves.

Simultaneously, a taunting voice reached his ears.

“So weak?”

Originally, Lumian’s plan was to cloak his fist in flames, launching a surprise attack on his adversary without alerting the nearby employees. In the ensuing chaos, he aimed to use Fallen Mercury and inflict a wound upon him. Then, before his foe could recover, Lumian would forcefully make his way past him, exiting the khaki-colored building housing the parliament member’s office through the balcony.

Throughout this endeavor, he would employ fireballs, Fire Raven, and other techniques to impede his opponent. Even if he sustained injuries, he had to escape into a nearby alley and disappear into Underground Trier before Hugues Artois's security personnel, the red-haired woman, and the other campaign members could react. After all, the fiery "armor" he created had the power to incinerate pathogens. With limited contact, the chances of contracting an illness were slim. And if something did manage to slip through, the symptoms would be mild enough for Lumian to endure until six in the morning.

If worse came to worst, he could borrow half a canister of healing agent from Franca.

Even Ruhr, a scavenger with his advanced age, succumbed to the illness only an hour or two after being exposed to the thick phlegm. Lumian believed it would be even less of a problem for him.

Of course, the condition was that the thick phlegm represented one of Tybalt's more potent methods. He couldn't concoct a highly virulent disease that triggered symptoms within a minute or two. Nonetheless, Lumian had his flames to shield him.

Yet, now, after a swift exchange, Lumian realized that Tybalt Jacques was far weaker than he had presumed!

This revelation instantly altered Lumian's course of action.

Silently, his form became shrouded in a cloak of fiery crimson.

The flames undulated like liquid, seamlessly encasing his skin, hair, garments, and hat. They hung there, a constant flickering and flowing.

Crimson flames continued to emerge from Lumian's being, melding with the inferno.

It felt as though Lumian had wrapped himself in a crimson cloak. Amidst the swirling blaze, his disguised countenance and blue eyes, each harboring a blazing fire, came into view.

With a snap, he discarded the dark cane and launched a fist wreathed in flames towards Tybalt.

The cane's handle remained aglow, eradicating any traces of fingerprints, sweat, or handprints.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Tybalt staggered back two steps, as though battling a tempest of fire. His eyes burned with a reddened intensity.

He harrumphed and expelled thick phlegm at Lumian.

The viscous yellow-green phlegm met the fiery cloak and was instantly incinerated, emitting a sizzling sound.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Lumian's arms, engulfed in crimson flames, swung repeatedly, pinning Tybalt to a corner of the office. His back pressed against the wall, with no escape or retreat. All he could do was defensively parry with his arms.

Witnessing the Sputum of Disease prove futile and the surrounding air heating up under the flames' influence, causing his skin to scorch, Tybalt's heart constricted, and he was about to cry out for help.

However, just as he opened his mouth, Lumian's flaming fist collided with his arm, causing him to tremble. His words became trapped in his throat.

Tybalt attempted to call for aid, but his pleas were repeatedly interrupted by the adversary. The deep voice of his foe resounded in his ears.

"Is that all you have?"

"How dare a feeble fledgling like you spit so recklessly?"

"Didn't your deity teach you to behave with civility?"

"I shall summon a hundred vagabonds to spit in your mouth!"

The mockery inflamed Tybalt's eyes, and he momentarily forgot about seeking assistance. All he yearned for was the other party to suffer and perish.

Translucent blisters materialized on his exposed skin, brimming with a sickly yellowish-black fluid.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Lumian's flaming fist consumed Tybalt's sleeve, rupturing the translucent blister within. Yet, the repugnant yellowish-black liquid failed to touch his flesh. It was first scorched by the flames before being halted by the gloves.

The lingering pathogens on the surface of the gloves rapidly dissipated beneath the crimson flames' effect.

Amidst the relentless but non-lethal strikes, all the translucent blisters burst of their own accord within the increasingly sweltering environment. The faint yellowish-black liquid sizzled and evaporated, forming an almost imperceptible mist around Tybalt.

However, the mist was either consumed by the flames or melted by the soaring temperatures. It couldn't breach the fiery cloak and corrode Lumian's body.

In that moment, Tybalt, battered multiple times, regained his senses from the Provocation. He opened his mouth and cried out for aid.

High-temperature gas and dissipating flames infiltrated Tybalt's mouth as Lumian's fist connected. The heat contorted his expression, rendering him unable to scream.

"Feeling grand, are we? Enjoying yourself?"

"When you spat without a care, did you ever consider that it would lead to your own demise?"

"Taking your life is no different from slaughtering a chicken!"

Lumian locked his gaze onto Tybalt's eyes, witnessing despair, fear, and pleas for mercy slowly emerge.

He didn't relent. With fists ablaze in crimson flames, he unleashed another relentless onslaught of strikes.

He had no intention of evading Tybalt's feeble attempts at defense; each blow found its mark.

With a subdued thud, Lumian abruptly halted and withdrew his hands.

Tybalt remained motionless against the wall, his eyes vacant.

The flames enveloping Lumian's form dissipated like a receding river, leaving behind a trace of crimson in his footsteps.

Without sparing Tybalt a second glance, Lumian stooped to retrieve his cane. He took Mr. K's finger and pressed it against the wall beside Tybalt.

Having done so, Lumian removed his half top hat and placed it upon his chest, bowing to Tybalt.

Then, he strode past his lifeless, statue-like prey and ventured onto the balcony. Concealed by the shadows, he pressed against the wall and effortlessly leaped to the side of the khaki-colored building.

Only then did the occupants upstairs sense something amiss. Several individuals rushed out, peering into the outside world. Lumian's figure had already vanished into the depths of the dark alley.

Simultaneously, a muffled sound emanated from Tybalt's rigid body.

Boom!

In an instant, he erupted from within, crimson flames splattering flesh and internal organs in every direction.

Fire Infusion!

Pyromaniac's Fire Infusion!

Prior to Lumian's departure, Tybalt had teetered on the precipice of death. His organs and brain had been consumed by the injected flames. What ensued was primarily the annihilation of his Spirit Body.

There were three reasons why Lumian had a change of heart at the last moment, opting to forgo the quickest and simplest method of dispatching Tybalt.

Firstly, utilizing the Montsouris ghost could potentially impact Tybalt's family. If possible, it was preferable to avoid such measures, despite the high probability that they had already succumbed to the influence of an evil deity. Secondly, he could utilize the implosion to create a gruesome scene of carnage, strewn with flesh and blood. Coupled with Mr. K's fingerprint, it would point subsequent investigators in the direction of the Aurora Order. It would also serve as a clear indication that Tybalt was a follower of an evil god. Thirdly, by utilizing Fire Infusion, he could delay the explosion and dismantle Tybalt's Spirit Body, thereby minimizing the efficacy of the evil god's Blessed's investigations through spirit channeling.

Furthermore, there was another reason. Beating and cursing Tybalt to death brought Lumian an undeniable sense of satisfaction.

…

Before long, a group of seven or eight individuals, including Hugues Artois, the red-haired lady, and the bespectacled secretary, arrived at Tybalt Jacques's door.

What greeted their eyes were scattered flesh, fragments, and internal organs, along with scorch marks that marred the ground.

The sight of red and black intermingled was jarring, rendering everyone present speechless.

"Who could have done this?" Hugues Artois exclaimed, horror etched on his face.

In his mind, the murder of Tybalt and the macabre aftermath served as a chilling warning and a preview of his own impending demise!

After all, who would go to such lengths to target an assistant secretary?

The red-haired lady cast a brief glance at Hugues Artois before speaking in an androgynous tone,

"Based on the evidence before us, it appears that the perpetrator is a Pyromaniac, or perhaps even more formidable. Given Tybalt's capabilities, he should have been dispatched within ten seconds. However, the assailant deliberately prolonged the act.

“It seems that the goal was to create this gruesome scene. It bears the hallmark of those lunatics from the Aurora Order.”

Hugues Artois’s eyes narrowed, and he lapsed into silence for a couple of seconds.

“Why would the Aurora Order target me?”

“I cannot say.” The red-haired lady peered deeply into Hugues Artois’s eyes, shaking her head slightly.

While the official Beyonders conducted their investigation, the original campaign team returned to Hugues Artois’s office.

The red-haired lady turned her attention to the secretary with gold-rimmed glasses.

“What has Tybalt been involved in recently?” she inquired.

“Due to his chronic illness, he intentionally disposed of his disease-ridden handkerchief and ended the lives of two elderly scavengers who had no children,” the secretary with gold-rimmed glasses truthfully replied. “I have managed to keep this matter under wraps.”

The red-haired lady muttered to herself, her voice barely audible, “Two childless elderly scavengers… It seems that Tybalt’s demise is undeniably targeted at Monsieur Member of Parliament.”

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Chapter 245 - 245 “Speech”

245 “Speech”

All eyes turned towards Hugues Artois, the distinguished member of parliament, his prominent nose and graying temples giving him an air of refinement. He had quickly regained his composure and wore a smile as he spoke.

“There’s no need to fret. If the assailant possessed the means to breach two layers of defense and confront me directly, there would be no reason to go through the trouble of assassinating Tybalt. This seems more like an act of blackmail, a surface-level threat.”

The four members of the campaign present nodded simultaneously, coming to the conclusion that Monsieur Member of Parliament’s deduction was accurate.

Hugues Artois turned to the lady with red hair.

“Cassandra, my knowledge of mysticism is limited. I have only heard that Beyonders can extract the truth from a deceased soul through spirit channeling. Will Tybalt’s spirit betray us?”

Cassandra, with her red hair flowing, slowly shook her head.

“Under normal circumstances, we would have to take the risk of cleansing the situation. However, in the recent attack, the assassin clearly took ample time to obliterate Tybalt’s spirit, thereby concealing his own identity. It’s equivalent to assisting us.”

Hugues Artois nodded slightly and cast a glance at the two anxious secretaries. With a smile, he reassured them.

“Rh?ne, Margaret, fear not. Time is on our side, and the future lies within our grasp. A minor setback will not hinder the ultimate outcome.

“You must always believe that our actions represent justice.”

Rh?ne, donning gold-rimmed spectacles, and the refined Margaret were bewildered. They couldn’t fathom being associated with the concept of “justice.”

Not only them, but even Cassandra with her red hair and the middle-aged, muscular Boduva looked at Hugues Artois in confusion, sensing they might have misheard.

Cautiously, Hugues Artois glanced towards the door, silently questioning if anyone might be eavesdropping.

After the red-haired Cassandra nodded, he launched into an impromptu speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen, while I may not possess the ability to convert and pray for a boon due to a binding contract, I have acquired a profound understanding of our world.

“You, better than anyone, should be aware that the vast cosmos above us represents an expansive universe. Countless planets exist within it, each akin to its own world. Many of these worlds harbor their own civilizations. The world we inhabit is but one among an endless expanse, as insignificant as a speck of dust.

“The seven deities have imprisoned us in this realm, preventing us from making contact with the civilizations that thrive in the universe. They desire our blindness and deafness, seeking to keep us enslaved for generations.

“They label these magnificent beings as evil gods. They weave falsehoods, warning us of the peril that lies in believing in these evil gods. Their goal is to prevent us from making contact with these higher civilizations, to keep us confined.

“If the belief in an evil god were genuinely dangerous, why do numerous civilizations in the universe, comprising different species, still exist?

“They are afraid. If these mighty entities were to descend upon our world, They alone would face destruction. Only the saints, angels, and fanatics who follow Them would be affected. For most people, it would merely be a shift in faith, devoid of peril.

“Believing in one of the seven deities is deemed faith, but believing in other great beings is not?

“We can no longer remain captive to the seven deities. We must venture forth into the future of humankind and the course of civilization. From the mere fact that boons can be obtained, these great beings are mightier than the seven deities. They will bestow protection and willingly offer their power. Their divine benevolence is boundless, akin to the vast sea.

“In the days to come, when we navigate the universe and reflect upon the journey we have undertaken, you shall come to comprehend that our cause is one of justice.

“In this process, death is an inevitability, yet those who perish are deserving. They are either aged, feeble, unlucky, or destined to meet such a fate. Most of the blame does not lie with us.

“Furthermore, they constitute only a minority. We cannot impede the majority from seeking refuge with a higher civilization, pursuing a better future.

“Ladies and gentlemen, sacrifices are inherent in any cause. As long as we steadfastly believe that our actions are driven by justice and persist unwaveringly, the future shall unquestionably be ours!

“In a decade’s time, humanity will secure a ticket to join the circle of cosmic civilization. We shall no longer be barbarians, hiding in the shadows of obscurity!”

The red-haired Cassandra, Secretary Rh?ne, and the rest were left dumbfounded.

Who was the true believer of the evil god?

Each had their own reasons for following different evil gods, and deep down, they knew they had veered onto the wrong path. Nevertheless, they had already set foot on this journey and had no choice but to press forward. Thus, they either used faith as a facade to gradually reshape their understanding, or they completely surrendered themselves, seeking any motivation to propel them onward.

And yet, Hugues Artois, someone who clearly wasn’t a believer and hadn’t received any favors or undergone significant assimilation, managed to speak such astonishing and captivating words straight from the depths of his heart.

The four members of the campaign were taken aback, realizing the sense behind Hugues Artois’ words, causing them to reevaluate the meaning behind their past actions.

After a few moments, the red-haired Cassandra let out a slow exhale. She looked at Hugues Artois and sincerely praised him.

“An exceptional speech, Monsieur Member of Parliament. In the future, when you choose your faith, I can recommend one for you.”

“Oh?” Hugues Artois inquired in a nasal voice.

Cassandra smiled and elaborated.

“Among the boons bestowed by that individual is one called Orator.”

Hugues Artois nodded and flashed a relaxed smile towards the four members of the team.

“Do not be disheartened by Tybalt’s demise. We will remain steadfast in our original plan.”

Cassandra, Rh?ne, Margaret, and Boduva responded in unison.

“Yes, Monsieur Member of Parliament.”

…

In the depths of Underground Trier.

Lumian took a detour and returned to the quarry cave. Swiftly, he shed his clothes and shoes, removing the wig and beard that concealed his true appearance.

Once he changed back into his ragged tramp attire and adorned a dark-blue cap, semi-translucent crimson Fire Ravens materialized around him.

The Fire Ravens darted out, alighting upon the cane, shirt, bow tie, wig, and other objects, causing them to erupt in soft explosions of flame.

Lumian, having turned his back, proceeded towards the exit of Underground Trier. Crimson flames surged in his wake, consuming everything related to the previous attack, casting an illuminating glow within the dark cavern below.

…

Around midnight, in the depths of the Eternal Blazing Sun Inquisition beneath église Saint-Robert.

Angoulême de Fran?ois, engrossed in perusing the investigation records, heard a knock on his office door.

His brown coat, adorned with two rows of golden buttons, hung neatly on a coat rack near the entrance. He wore a light golden shirt featuring the emblem of the Sun Sacred Order, along with dark brown pants.

“Please, come in,” Angoulême calmly invited.

Valentine, powdered hair and face adorned with subtle makeup, entered the room.

He had been preoccupied with thoughts of Cordu all this time. Upon learning of survivors appearing in the Trier region, he had submitted an application and transferred to this post. His wife and child had long yearned for the bustling city of Trier, so they eagerly moved with him without much persuasion.

He was on night duty with a few teammates and happened to encounter the murder of the member of parliament’s assistant secretary.

Valentine, clad in a slim blue tweed coat with a golden brooch, took a seat across from Angoulême and spoke directly.

“Deacon, why haven’t we investigated Hugues Artois?

“While most members of the Aurora Order may be crazy, they possess an uncanny ability to detect heretics. Although not every person they target is a believer in the evil gods, at least 70% are.

“Considering the information we’ve gathered, we can reasonably conclude that Tybalt Jacques, who met his demise tonight, was a heretic and wielded the power of decay. Furthermore, he served as Hugues Artois’s assistant secretary.

“We cannot allow a highly suspicious individual to continue serving as a member of parliament. Investigating him is not only a responsibility to the people of the market district, but also to Hugues Artois himself. If we find no evidence of wrongdoing, we can assist him in purging any heretics surrounding him.”

Angoulême hadn’t anticipated his new team leader to be more devout and zealous than himself. He couldn’t help but raise his hand and furrow his brows.

With a bitter smile, he responded.

“Perhaps you are unaware, but every member of parliament has signed a contract with the two Churches and received a notarized contract.

“In this contract, they pledge their faith, display their abilities and associated sources. The two Churches promise not to restrict the personal freedom of any member of parliament or their key staff without substantial and compelling evidence. They won’t be subject to the influence of Beyonders.

“This is to safeguard the authority of the National Convention.

“According to the contract, Hugues Artois believes fervently in the mighty Eternal Blazing Sun and is not a Beyonder.

“Hence, you may question him and his core staff, but that is the extent of it.”

Valentine couldn’t conceal his disappointment.

“Why is such a contract in place?”

“It is a byproduct of the past coup d’état, a change that accompanied the course of history,” Angoulême provided a simple explanation.

Valentine let out a sigh, rose from his seat, and extended his arms.

“Praise the Sun!”

“Praise the Sun!” Angoulême stood up and returned the gesture, watching his subordinate exit the office.

…

Quartier de No?l, Holy Palace Hospital.

Jenna sat upon a small stool, slumped beside her mother Elodie’s lightly slumbering form in the hospital bed.

After bidding farewell to Franca and sending her brother Julien home, who had to attend to his factory duties come dawn, Jenna found herself alone. The Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons had yet to resume its acting training, as plans were underway to auction it, along with Auberge du Coq Doré, at the police

headquarters. However, the recent explosion at the Goodville Chemical Factory had caused a delay in those proceedings.

Suddenly, Elodie stirred. Jenna startled awake, her eyes fixating on her mother, who gradually opened her own.

Elodie's gaze mirrored the face of her daughter as she mustered a smile.

"I thought I was about to see your father."

Without awaiting Jenna's reply, Elodie inquired, her voice frail, "How are my injuries?"

Jenna, overjoyed to witness her mother awaken from her coma, beamed genuinely and responded, "They're not severe. Look, no surgery is required."

Elodie heaved a sigh of relief and nodded slowly.

Still recovering from her coma, her body and mind weren't yet in their prime state. After a brief exchange, she drifted back into slumber.

Jenna clasped her mother's hand and beheld the contentment that graced the wrinkled, gray-haired countenance beneath the gentle illumination streaming in from the window.

Observing for a while longer, she glanced upward and caught sight of the first rays of dawn gradually painting the sky with light.

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Chapter 246 - 246 Resolution

246 Resolution

As the first rays of dawn illuminated the room, Lumian slowly opened his eyes, awakened by the gentle chime of bells from église Saint-Robert.

The previous night, he had stayed at Auberge du Coq Doré.

He raised his right hand to touch his head. His bald head had grown thick and healthy hair once more.

Leaving the comfort of his bed, Lumian walked over to the full-length mirror and saw a reflection that looked both familiar and unfamiliar.

Back in Cordu, his hair had never been dyed golden.

But in the morning light, he couldn't help but smile, feeling better than he had in a long time.

At the very least, he didn't meet with failure with everything he did. Killing and taking revenge didn't pose a problem.

After breakfast at a street vendor, Lumian planned to find a barbershop in either Quartier de l'Observatoire or Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative to revert his hair color to golden. But before he could set out, hurried footsteps approached his room.

He braced himself, thinking someone might kick the door open, but instead, there was a knock.

It was Franca, who rarely rose so early. She couldn't hide her surprise upon seeing Lumian's pure black hair.

"You dyed it back?" she exclaimed.

"Sort of," Lumian replied, observing Franca as she entered Room 207 and closed the door behind her.

Without mincing words, Franca confronted him, "Did you kill Hugues Artois's assistant secretary? And did you rush to advance to Pyromaniac last night?"

Lumian stood up, smiling.

"Yes."

Franca was momentarily at a loss for words with the frank admission.

After a few seconds, she hissed and said, “You brat, you promised me you would hold back and endure, but the very next moment, you went ahead without hesitation. You really can’t suppress your hatred for a night, can you?

“If you keep going like this, I seriously doubt you’ll survive this year—no, this month!”

Lumian explained simply, “Actually, I didn’t intend to kill Tybalt last night. I merely wanted to monitor him, gather information, and plan a proper approach to deal with him together with you. But an opportunity presented itself, and it was too good to pass up. I couldn’t convince myself to hold back.”

“Right, I made preparations in all aspects, including measures against divination and tracking.”

Relieved, Franca asked, “That Tybalt guy seemed weak. Was it easy for you to handle him?”

“He mainly transmitted diseases through contact, and Pyromaniacs happened to counter that ability. If not for my anti-divination and anti-spirit channeling preparations, I could have taken care of him in ten seconds,” Lumian recalled.

Franca sighed, admitting, “You got lucky. Have you considered the possibility that your target might be much stronger?”

“My initial judgment was that he wouldn’t be too formidable. If he exceeded a certain threshold, I was prepared to use my dirk,” Lumian replied before asking, “Why are you up so early?”

“Gardner woke me up!” Franca replied with gritted teeth. “He instructed me to gather the leaders of the Savoie Mob and find the person responsible for killing Hugues Artois’s assistant secretary. When I heard the details, I knew it had to be you! I told you last night to get in the right condition before drinking the Pyromaniac potion, but you went ahead and consumed it anyway.”

Lumian spoke earnestly, his voice filled with sincerity. “I believed that I was in the perfect state to advance to Pyromaniac, so I swiftly concocted the potion. Will Boss suspect me?”

“For now, no,” Franca replied, shaking her head. “Besides yourself, nobody expected you to consume the potion last night. Moreover, you cunningly framed the Aurora Order. Gardner doesn’t see any motive in you.”

Franca glanced at Lumian’s head and suggested, “Come here, I’ll help you restore your original hair color. It’s best not to make any changes during a time like this to avoid arousing suspicion.”

“Alright,” Lumian agreed, feeling delighted to save some money.

…

In the morning, the ward buzzed with more activity compared to the somberness of the night. Echoing through the air were the cries of those being carried away, the presence of relatives escorting loved ones back home, and the determination of some patients who defied the cries, choosing to depart from the hospital's confines.

Jenna and Elodie—who had regained consciousness—observed the scene in silence. They understood the painful reality unfolding before them.

Not everyone could bear the weight of insurmountable medical expenses, nor did they wish to drag their families into the depths of despair.

Sometimes, the patient surrendered while the family persisted. Other times, it was the family that gave up, leaving the patient with no choice but to accept their fate. At times, patient and family would tacitly leave the ward, exchange silent glances, and be unable to hold back their tears as they cried or wailed.

After a while, as the ward regained a semblance of tranquility, Elodie, who had managed to sit up, whispered softly, "How long will I have to stay here for treatment?"

Jenna pondered for a moment before deciding to tell her mother the truth. It was an impossible matter to conceal. The doctors' rounds, treatments, and further examinations would inevitably reveal some information. Besides, Elodie would piece it together based on her physical condition and the fact that she hadn't been discharged after several days.

Organizing her thoughts, Jenna explained, "The doctor said you'll be here for months, possibly even half a year. Your external injuries aren't severe, but your body has suffered significant damage. Unless you make a full recovery, your condition may worsen."

Before Elodie could respond, Jenna smiled reassuringly and continued, "I've already secured the funds for your treatment. I borrowed the money from Franca. She has no shortage of resources. She promised Julien and me that we could repay it in two to three years, in installments. By then, Dad's accident compensation will surely have been paid. There may even be hope for yours."

Elodie's expression faltered for a moment. After a few seconds, she spoke with weariness in her voice, "Why will it take so long…"

"With such a massive explosion and the chemical gasses, it's a miracle that you survived," Jenna said before asking. "What exactly happened back then?"

Elodie contemplated for a moment and replied wearily, "I don't know. The explosion happened so suddenly, and I lost consciousness.

“I think it originated near the metal tank. Sigh, many of the factory’s facilities are old and prone to breakdowns. They require repairs, but the boss refuses to invest in replacements. Sigh…”

After chatting for a while, Jenna noticed her mother’s energy waning. She advised Elodie to rest for a while and headed towards the washroom at the end of the corridor.

As soon as Elodie witnessed Jenna’s departure from the ward, she mustered all her strength, disconnected the IV, and leaned against the wall for support. Gasping for breath, she took two steps towards the ward diagonally opposite, where doctors and nurses meticulously examined each injured individual.

Elodie located the doctor, provided her ward and bed number, and inquired, “How long will my treatment last?”

The doctor leafed through his records and responded, “We don’t have all the results yet, but we estimate it will take about five to seven months.”

“What will be the cost of treatment each month?” Elodie inquired.

The doctor pondered for a moment and replied, “Let’s wait for the complete assessment. If all goes well, it should amount to around 200 verl d’or per week. As treatment progresses, the cost will decrease. However, if your condition isn’t too favorable, it might range from 300 to 400 verl d’or per week. Furthermore, even after you leave the hospital, you must prioritize rest and avoid exerting yourself.”

Elodie found herself rendered speechless. The nurse assisted her back to the ward and reinserted the needle into her arm.

Shortly before noon, Julien rushed into the ward, his concern for his mother evident in his eyes.

After conversing with him for a while, Jenna announced, “I’ll go to the hospital cafeteria and bring back some food for you.”

With that, she departed the ward, moving briskly as she descended the stairs.

Thanks to Lumian’s guidance, Jenna had come to realize that she possessed extraordinary abilities as a Beyonder. She was no longer an ordinary individual. With a willingness to take calculated risks, she had numerous avenues to earn money.

Consequently, the expenses for Elodie’s treatment and the overwhelming debt held no power over her. The fact that her mother had been saved was cause for celebration, a reason to extol the sun.

In the ward, Elodie gazed at Julien, who sat beside her, and posed a question with a tender expression, “You’re nearly 23, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Julien replied, a smile gracing his face. “I’ve been a provider for the family for quite some time now. But in your eyes, I’m still a youngling.”

Elodie offered a faint smile and spoke, “That’s because my criteria for true adulthood differ from others. I’ve always believed that one can only be considered an adult when they possess a skill that consistently earns them money. You’re still a year away from that, and Celia has another year and a half to go.

“You’ve endured so much these past few years.”

“It was you who endured,” Julien responded with a sigh. “Before I could truly assist, you worked three jobs a day for a whole year, from 6 a.m. until midnight.”

Emotions surged within him, causing him to blurt out, “We’ll definitely cure you!”

Elodie chuckled in delight, her hand gently caressing her flaxen hair.

“Unfortunately, my wig is gone.

“And your sister. She previously deceived us, claiming that the theater required her to dye her hair a brownish-yellow shade. In reality, it was to prevent herself from being recognized when she went to sing at the dance hall. I don’t know what to do with her.

“Sigh, I truly don’t want you to shoulder more debt. It will waste years. By then, you won’t be young anymore…”

Julien swiftly consoled his mother, assuring her that he excelled at his job and would undoubtedly receive a salary increase next year.

After rambling for a few minutes, Elodie clutched her chest and beseeched Julien, “I’m not feeling well. Please find a doctor for me.”

“Okay.” Julien stood up abruptly and dashed out of the room.

Elodie promptly removed the IV needle and stumbled toward the ward’s window, relying on the nearby beds for support.

Meanwhile, on the first floor of Holy Palace Hospital.

Jenna emerged from the cafeteria, carrying a wooden lunch box, and began her journey up the staircase.

Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she witnessed a figure hurtling downwards, resulting in a resounding thud.

Jenna’s heart skipped a beat, her mind filled with unease. Hastily, she turned around, uncertain about the source of her apprehension. She dashed out of the hall and approached the spot where the person had jumped, maneuvering through the gathering crowd.

In the next instant, she beheld a crimson liquid seeping and a familiar face adorned with delicate wrinkles.

With a thud, the lunch box slipped from her grasp, crashing onto the ground. Her eyes grew vacant, reflecting a vivid red.

The lifeless body belonged to her mother, Elodie.

The person who had leaped from the building was her mother, Elodie.

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Chapter 247 - 247 Instigation

247 Instigation

In the café on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise,

Lumian finished his lunch and caught sight of Franca once more. She was attired in a white shirt, light-colored breeches, and vibrant red boots.

This time, her countenance was grave, causing an uneasiness to settle upon Louis, Sarkota, and the other gangsters. They feared that trouble might accompany her arrival.

Lumian rose from his seat, casting an inquisitive gaze in her direction.

Franca exhaled slowly and spoke, her tone weighted with solemnity.

“Jenna’s mother passed away.”

Lumian was taken aback, as though he had witnessed Flameng’s lifeless body dangling from a window frame or Ruhr decaying to the bone.

His eyes narrowed, and his hands clenched into fists. After a few moments, he inquired, “Was it due to her declining condition?”

“No,” Franca shook her head. “It was suicide.”

Observing Lumian’s perplexed expression, she sighed and elaborated, “Last night, when I sought out Jenna, I worried that she might put up a brave facade and keep her difficulties concealed or seek our assistance, so I made a point to meet the attending physician and the nurses responsible for her mother’s care. I treated them to coffee and dessert, urging them to keep a close watch on Jenna’s mother. I arranged for them to notify me immediately of any complications, and I pledged to cover any necessary expenses.

“They informed me that upon learning about the months-long treatment and its approximate cost, Jenna’s mother took advantage of Jenna’s visit to the cafeteria and Julien’s absence in search of a doctor. She leaped from the sixth floor…

“Alas, her health was already frail, and she perished instantly upon impact.”

Lumian fell into a pensive silence. Suddenly, he pressed his left chest and sneered, “Is this fate?”

Franca couldn’t provide an answer.

…

At 1 p.m., Lumian and Franca arrived at the Holy Palace Hospital. The nurse, whom Franca had deliberately befriended, guided them to the Farewell Sanctuary, situated on the ground floor of an annex.

The place was known as the Farewell Sanctuary, where the departed awaited their purification.

Julien, Jenna's brother, sat by the door, his head in his hands, wearing a pained expression as he stared at the sky-blue-painted wall opposite.

Approaching him, Franca asked in a hushed voice, "Are Auntie and Jenna inside?"

Julien nodded slowly and whispered to himself in anguish, "I shouldn't have left her alone in the ward…

"I shouldn't have left her alone in the ward…"

Franca didn't know how to console him; all she could do was sigh and enter the Farewell Sanctuary alongside Julien.

Elodie's body lay on a bed covered by a white sheet, concealed beneath a plain white cloth.

The blood on her body had been cleansed. Her face appeared pallid, and her eyes were tightly shut.

Jenna sat on a stool across from her mother, her gaze empty and her voice absent, as if her soul had departed.

Franca called out, a mix of pain and concern in her tone, but Jenna ignored her, as if she had encased herself in another realm.

Lumian pulled up a chair and seated himself next to Jenna, his gaze also fixed upon the lifeless figure of Elodie.

After a few seconds, he spoke in a deep voice, "I understand what you're feeling. Not long ago, I, too, lost the family member who meant the most to me."

Jenna remained silent, as if she had transformed into a statue.

Lumian directed his gaze toward the same direction as Jenna and continued, "But you need to know who is responsible for this tragedy.

"Is it your fault? Is it your mother's fault? Is it your brother's fault?

"No, you did nothing wrong! Faced with accidents and debts, you chose to endure them with determination. You chose to rely on your own labor and suffering to secure a new life. It took you several years to emerge from it slowly. Is that

wrong? No!

“This time, you didn’t abandon your loved one. You fought hard to find a solution. Is that wrong? No!

“You didn’t hide anything from your mother. You informed her about the duration of the treatment, the costs, and the source of funding. Is that wrong? No! There was no way to conceal it!

“Your mother loves you and wants you to avoid reliving the painful past few years. She wants you to walk in the light, not in darkness. Is that wrong? No!

“Who is at fault?

“It’s the factory owner who continuously appeals and delays the compensation for the accident, subjecting you to years of painful and oppressive existence!

“It’s the laws that protect their actions!

“It’s Bono Goodville, who disregards safety regulations and fails to replace worn-out machines!

“It’s the exorbitant cost of treatment that plunges the less fortunate into despair!

“It’s the National Convention and the government who have caused all of this!”

Jenna’s expression finally shifted, a glimmer of pain surfacing in her vacant eyes and impassive face.

Lumian turned towards the door, his voice resonating with depth as he spoke, “I have something else to say. Perhaps the explosion at Goodville Chemical Factory, which led to your mother’s tragic fate, wasn’t an accident.”

Jenna instinctively turned to face Lumian and Franca.

Lumian directed his gaze towards Elodie’s corpse.

“Perhaps it was a murder, a sacrificial offering to an evil deity.

“Our Honorable Member of Parliament, Hugues Artois, has been assessed by the Blessed of powerful evil gods as an open-minded individual. He is surrounded by heretics, including Tybalt Jacques, the assistant secretary responsible for spreading diseases and taking innocent lives.

“Yesterday morning, Bono Goodville paid a visit to the parliament member’s office, and by evening, his chemical plant had exploded.

“When I encountered Tybalt Jacques in the guise of Bono Goodville, he mentioned something about unavoidable troubles following an organization’s decay. It convinced me that the chemical plant explosion was something they eagerly anticipated. It might have been orchestrated with a specific purpose that

remains unknown to us.

“Are you consumed by anger? Do you feel a burning hatred? Can you accept this?

“Do you wish to sit here and watch as the murderers responsible for your mother’s death and the destruction of your happiness revel in champagne, indulge in dance parties, and inflict more heartbreak on innocent families?”

Jenna’s expression twisted slightly, as if she grappled with conflicting emotions within.

Eventually, she raised her hands to cover her face, weeping bitterly.

“But my mother… she cannot be brought back…”

Franca crouched down before Jenna and embraced her, allowing her tears to flow freely. As Jenna wept, Franca offered her guidance, “What your mother desires most is for both you and your brother to be free from the burdens of debt and to embark on a fresh new life. She wishes for one of you to become a remarkable stage actress, while the other escapes the constraints of ordinary labor and masters a particular skill. She yearns for you to live well. Can you bear to disappoint her?”

Jenna sobbed and asked, “But isn’t it said that the night will pass and light will emerge? Why? Why is it always so dark? Why can’t I see any light…”

“It will come, it will come,” Franca repeated, patting Jenna’s back soothingly. “What you must do now is to give your mother a proper burial and consider doing something meaningful in her honor.”

“Okay,” Jenna agreed tearfully.

She wept until exhaustion overtook her, finally finding stability within her emotions.

At that moment, the clergyman from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, who had come to offer his final words of solace, arrived.

Clad in a white robe adorned with intricate golden threads, he entered the room alongside Julien and positioned himself beside Elodie’s lifeless body.

In one hand, he grasped the Holy Bible and recited a prayer, while the other hand held a suspended bottle of holy water.

Eventually, a beam of sunlight, accompanied by the holy water, materialized from thin air and gently bathed Elodie.

“Praise the Sun. May this sister find peace and enter the realm of God.” The clergyman extended his arms.

“Praise the Sun!” Jenna and Julien joined in prayer.

Observing the ceremony, Lumian bowed his head and silently scoffed.

Franca, a devout follower of the God of Steam and Machinery, refrained from praising the Sun as well.

With the purification ritual concluded, the priest departed from the Farewell Sanctuary. In his place, the administrator in charge of the Holy Palace Hospital morgue entered and posed a question to Julien and Jenna, “Should we proceed with burial or cremation for this sister? Shall we send her to the catacombs, Cimetière des Innocents, or Cimetière des Prêtres?”

Julien and Jenna exchanged glances before responding, “Cremation. We’ll personally escort her to the catacombs.”

Their father also rested there.

The morgue administrator made a notation and added, “There have been numerous casualties from last night. The crematorium won’t be available until next week. Would you like this sister to remain in the morgue for the time being?”

“Very well.” Jenna’s voice trembled slightly.

And so, the four of them watched as Elodie’s visage was veiled with a white cloth and her body was gently guided out of the Farewell Sanctuary.

They trailed behind the wheeled bed, descending through the steam-powered elevator into the subterranean realm until they arrived outside the morgue.

The morgue door gleamed in a silvery-gray hue, while the interior emanated an eerie coldness, producing a misty white fog at the intersection.

Jenna stood in a daze as her mother, Elodie, was propelled through the door, vanishing into the frigid chamber filled with metallic cabinets illuminated by gas-powered wall lamps. She remained fixated as the silver-gray door slowly shut.

Unconsciously, she took a few steps forward, halting at the threshold.

Silently, the door closed.

Her mother was now forever beyond her sight.

…

As they returned to Passy Bridge in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Jenna’s eyes fixed on her brother Julien, who walked ahead of her with a heavy heart. Sorrow engulfed her as the bright afternoon sun blinded her vision.

Franca averted her gaze from Julien’s retreating form and contemplated finding a task to occupy Jenna’s mind.

“Your brother is emotionally distressed. It seems he blames himself. Offer him guidance in the upcoming days and assure him that it wasn’t his fault. Any ordinary person would have hurriedly sought a doctor.”

Jenna momentarily snapped out of her sorrow and tersely acknowledged, “I’ll counsel him. But what if it doesn’t work?”

She glanced at Lumian and Franca, her expression filled with helplessness.

Franca nodded reassuringly.

“When the time comes, I can assist him in finding a genuine Psychiatrist—one with Beyonder abilities.”

Jenna let out a sigh of relief, her nose sniffing with gratitude.

“Thank you. Thank you both.”

Lumian, drawing from his own experiences, reminded her, “You must also attend to your own mental well-being.”

Jenna pressed her lips together and nodded, her gaze gradually transforming into one of determination.

In a hushed, raspy voice, she addressed Franca and Lumian, “Tonight, I intend to pay a ‘visit’ to Bono Goodville.”

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Chapter 248 - 248 Visitors

248 Visitors

In Quartier des Thermes, at 55 Rue Chestnut, stood a three-story building tinged with a grayish-blue hue. It boasted a delightful garden, a well-kept lawn, and even stables.

Within the establishment, a band played a melodic tune from a corner. Bono Goodville, the owner of this fine establishment, gracefully navigated through the guests with a glass of golden champagne in hand. Engaging in conversations about the aftermath of the chemical plant explosion, he cunningly aimed to evade his responsibilities while securing a substantial compensation from the insurance company.

Between his interactions, he chatted with the wife of a government official, conferred with his lawyer, and sought out influential figures relevant to the matter at hand.

Like a natural social butterfly, he effortlessly flitted from one person to another, exhibiting wit and vigor amidst the elegant setting. The light from the crystal chandelier illuminated his dark-blue eyes and thick brown beard, lending them a captivating sparkle.

As he gracefully maneuvered around an unassuming guest, Bono Goodville unexpectedly encountered Travis Everett.

The superintendent of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman was not in uniform that evening. Clad in a sleek black suit paired with a stylish blue bow tie, he held a glass of light golden champagne in his hand.

“Superintendent Everett, it is imperative that you ensure my protection during this trying time!” Bono Goodville smiled at Travis Everett, expressing his concerns. “The explosion claimed many lives, and I fear their bereaved relatives might resort to drastic measures.”

Everett adjusted his black-framed glasses and returned the smile.

“Ah, you see, Quartier des Thermes falls beyond my jurisdiction. Moreover, once I stepped onto this street, it became evident that the frequency and intensity of police patrols have notably increased.”

“Indeed, but didn’t you hire numerous bodyguards? What is there to worry about? Those who perished were ordinary workers. They pose no threat to you. Furthermore, they are unaware of your place of residence.”

Everett jestingly remarked, his tone lighthearted.

“But if the injured and their families discover that you continue to host a lavish banquet, serving fine wine while being serenaded by a small accompanying symphony band, their anguish might drive them to madness. They could drag you and your family into the depths of despair.”

Bono Goodville sheepishly smiled and replied, “The banquet is unrelated to compensation. I must adhere to the law and await judgment.”

“Superintendent Everett, if I were to return to the market district to handle matters, I humbly request your assistance in assigning two or three police officers to protect me.”

Everett gently nodded.

“That is my duty, but I must remind you that several police officers’ families are employed at your chemical plant.”

Implicitly, he emphasized the urgency of compensating his subordinates, hoping for a swift resolution.

Bono Goodville nodded silently, seemingly unaffected.

The banquet continued into the early hours of the morning. Amidst the lingering fragrance, Bono Goodville bid farewell to his three children, embracing each one before ascending to the third floor.

Untying his bow tie, he entered the bedroom with his wife, ready to retire for the night.

With a flick, the gas wall lamp ignited, casting a soft glow that reflected in Bono Goodville’s wide eyes.

There, in his cherished recliner, sat an unexpected guest.

Although seated, the man leaned forward, exuding an air of superiority that made Bono Goodville feel small and insignificant.

Clad in a worker’s uniform of muted grayish-blue, complete with a dark-blue cap, his face concealed behind swaths of white bandages, leaving only his piercing blue eyes and a glimpse of his nostrils visible.

Bono Goodville’s heart raced, his instinct urging him to scream for help.

However, before a sound could escape his lips, a phantom-like crimson flaming raven materialized behind the “surprise” visitor. With a swift swoop, it crashed into Bono Goodville’s teeth.

A soft bang resonated as Bono Goodville's mouth seared with pain, and two teeth clattered to the ground. Agony distorted his features, stifling his cry.

At that precise moment, a pair of sharp daggers pressed against the backs of both Bono Goodville and his wife.

Emerging from the shadows of the doorway, Franca and Jenna closed the bedroom door behind them, effectively trapping their captives.

One of them donned a black robe with a concealed hood and leather armor, her face veiled by darkness. The other sported a man's linen shirt, a brown jacket, dark brown trousers, and laceless leather boots. A silver-white metal mask adorned her upper face, leaving only her eyes exposed.

Franca used her free hand to steady Bono Goodville, preventing him from collapsing in agony.

Maintaining his seated posture, Lumian grinned.

"Monsieur Goodville, consider that a warning. It could have been much worse. Those two missing teeth and minor injuries are nothing compared to what could have transpired."

Bono Goodville's wife snapped out of her daze, her voice trembling with fear as she asked, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Who am I?" Lumian chuckled, a hint of mischief in his tone. "You may consider me your father."

With a glance toward Franca, she retrieved the truth serum Lumian had provided earlier and administered it to Bono Goodville.

As Lumian awaited the serum's effects, he maintained his smile and continued, "Monsieur Goodville, I had hoped for a more challenging encounter, but instead, here we are, having a pleasant conversation. You disappoint me."

He hadn't received a boon!

Under the influence of the truth serum, Bono Goodville wore a bitter expression as he mustered the courage to ask, "What do you want? I have a considerable sum of money in my safe. I can give it to you!"

Jenna's anger flared up, surging from her chest to her head.

In a sudden motion, she raised her left foot and delivered a swift kick to Bono Goodville's calf.

Oh, how she longed to strike him where it truly hurt, but circumstances prevented her from doing so!

Dammit, take your money to the catacombs!

Bono Goodville's body leaned, and the sound of bones cracking reached his ears.

Before his instinctual scream could escape, frost materialized, sealing his voice.

Lumian nodded in approval, acknowledging Jenna's actions. Once Bono Goodville had regained composure, Lumian spoke, "I want to know why you orchestrated the detonation at your own chemical plant."

Bono Goodville's expression transformed, and he blurted out, "How did you find out?"

Before he could finish his sentence, he wished to raise his right hand and slap himself.

Shouldn't he have denied the accusation first? Why did he utter his thoughts so recklessly?

"Well, well, you are quite forthcoming. I was merely testing you, and you readily confessed," Lumian remarked, his tone almost causing Bono Goodville's brain to seize.

Jenna felt as if her soul had vacated her body.

Though Lumian's analysis had mentally prepared her, hearing the admission still left her in disbelief.

Could there truly exist such a wicked individual?

Hundreds of families were devastated!

Snapping out of her stupor, Jenna clenched her teeth tightly,

fearing that any relaxation might ignite her anger, prompting her to stab Bono Goodville.

No, it would be hundreds of stabs!

Goodville's wife also stared at her husband in a state of shock and fear.

She had believed the explosion at the chemical plant to be a mere accident.

Lumian cast a cold gaze upon Bono Goodville and questioned, "Why did you do it? Does it have any connection to someone within Hugues Artois' office?"

Upon hearing the latter inquiry, Bono Goodville could not contain his astonishment and dread.

After consuming the peculiar liquid and "confessing" to orchestrating the chemical plant explosion, Bono Goodville's psychological defenses crumbled. In that moment, an overwhelming urge consumed him—to drag someone down with him and share the burden of his sins.

"It's Rh?ne and Tybalt! They are Secretary and Assistant Secretary to Member of Parliament Hugues Artois.

"They have been dropping hints that the chemical plant has been deteriorating for years and could explode at any given moment. I thought I might as well find a way to cash in on the insurance compensation I had purchased in the past. And when the time came, Member of Parliament Hugues Artois would use the excuse of setting up a factory to boost the economy and protect the interests of the factory owner, thereby securing funds for reconstruction and compensation.

"They kept saying that everything decays. My chemical plant was no exception, so I anticipated various problems. Instead of waiting for it to explode naturally, I decided to exchange it for greater benefits.

"I visited them again yesterday morning. For some reason, I was foolish enough to be convinced by their words. When the explosion actually occurred, I grew fearful and went to the member of parliament's office thrice.

"They assured me everything would be fine."

What an idiot. He's not even a heretic… Could superpowers have influenced him? Tybalt had also mentioned decay when he saw me disguised as Bono Goodville. What is their true agenda? Lumian pondered for a moment, about to inquire further about the conversation, when the sound of a doorbell being pulled suddenly resonated from the iron gate outside the lawn.

Lumian and Franca exchanged swift glances, both coming up with guesses.

To arrive at such an hour, ringing the doorbell politely, it could only be either a friend or an official investigator seeking Bono Goodville!

Without uttering a word, Lumian rose to his feet, and Franca sheathed her dagger in silence.

Jenna reacted instantly, comprehending their intentions.

Taking a diagonal step, she raised her dagger high and thrust it into Bono Goodville's shoulder.

Blood spurted forth as Bono Goodville let out a pained grunt.

Jenna didn't linger. She dashed towards the window opposite the main entrance.

On her dagger, black flames ignited and swiftly extinguished in several spots within the room.

The trio leaped out of the building, vaulted over the iron fence bordering the garden, and vanished into the encompassing night.

…

Inside the bedroom, a three-person team consisting of Angoulême, Valentine, and the mixed-blood Imre confronted Bono Goodville, who had just finished bandaging his scorched mouth.

The factory owner seethed with anger as he addressed them, “Officer, I was nearly abducted by three criminals!”

Angoulême surveyed the scene, a smile playing on his lips.

“We will investigate that matter later. For now, the primary problem lies with you.”

“My problem?” Bono Goodville grew alarmed.

Angoulême nodded slightly.

“Let us first confirm your faith before delving into your visit to the member of parliament’s office on the morning of the chemical plant explosion.”

With insufficient evidence to take drastic measures against the member of parliament and his staff, the Purifiers redirected their investigation towards Bono Goodville.

Upon hearing these words, Bono Goodville, his psychological defenses shattered, paled in apprehension.

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Chapter 249 - 249 Loophole in the Contract

249 Loophole in the Contract

Observing Bono Goodville's reaction, Angoulême's confidence grew a little.

With a swift motion, he withdrew a pen and paper, preparing to draft a Notary Certificate. The concept behind it was for Bono Goodville to swear an oath to a deity, ensuring his honesty during the subsequent questioning.

As Angoulême affixed his signature, the paper emitted a radiant golden glow.

Bono Goodville swallowed nervously, feeling the weight of the situation.

In recent years, as a well-known factory owner in Trier, he had encountered mystic knowledge and extraordinary powers that surpassed the imagination of ordinary folk. Such matters were not unfamiliar to him. It was akin to one of the three abductors blasting him with a flaming raven, another conjuring black flames, and a third leaping from the third floor.

"Sign your name," Angoulême instructed, handing Bono Goodville the Notary Certificate, now devoid of its golden glow.

"Very well." Bono Goodville's right hand trembled as he inscribed his name upon the pledge.

With each stroke, a flash of golden light emanated from his penmanship.

Once he finished, Angoulême spoke in a deep, commanding voice.

"Which deity do you believe in?"

"The God of Steam and Machinery." For Bono Goodville, this question held no challenge.

Angoulême proceeded to the next inquiry.

"Why did you visit the member of parliament's office on the morning of the chemical plant explosion?"

Bono Goodville hesitated for two seconds. Fearful of supernatural powers and divine witnesses, he repeated what he had divulged to Lumian and the others under the influence of the remaining truth serum.

Angoulême, Valentine, and Imre took turns posing questions, allowing Bono Goodville to reconstruct his conversation with the Member of Parliament's secretary, Rh?ne, and his assistant secretary, Tybalt, as accurately as possible.

When the inquiry concluded, Angoulême delivered the verdict to Bono Goodville.

"You shall be arrested for arson, deliberate detonation of an explosion, and murder. Your assets will be temporarily frozen pending compensation for the deceased and injured."

Bono Goodville's face drained of color as he slumped into the recliner, utterly depleted.

Valentine took a couple of steps towards the door, casting a glance at the corridor beyond. Lowering his voice, he proposed, "Deacon, after we bring this blasphemous scoundrel to the police headquarters, shall we formally apprehend Hugues Artois's secretary, Rh?ne?"

Angoulême sighed, shaking his head slowly.

"Not yet.

"Did you not notice? Rh?ne and the late Tybalt were exceedingly cautious. They never explicitly suggested that Bono Goodville instigated the explosion at his chemical plant. They merely insinuated their support for the member of parliament's policies and preached a philosophy of decay. They might exploit Bono Goodville's blinded mind, misconstruing their words to justify his actions.

"It has been nearly two days, and finding any traces of Bono Goodville being influenced by superpowers is proving challenging.

"Put simply, we lack sufficient evidence to apprehend Secretary Rh?ne and employ Beyonder powers in the interrogation. We can only summon and question him through conventional means."

Valentine seethed with anger, but he realized there was nothing he could do.

He harbored an unwavering certainty that something was awry with the member of parliament's secretary, yet due to regulations, he couldn't employ mystical methods to confront him.

After a brief pause, he glanced at Bono Goodville, sprawled on the recliner like a heap of decaying meat, and spoke with a deep voice, "I suggest we deliver him to the stake!"

Angoulême nodded, addressing Valentine and Imre, "Let us proceed. Take this man back to the market district, where he deserves to meet his end in ten different manners."

Valentine was taken aback.

“Deacon, aren’t we going to track down the three Beyonders who infiltrated this place?”

Angoulême chuckled. “Why should we?”

Valentine gazed at him, perplexed by his deacon’s approach.

Imre, accustomed to his ways, whispered, “The three Beyonders infiltrated this place without pillaging or harming anyone. They merely sought information about the chemical plant explosion and the visit to the member of parliament’s office. It’s evident they possess a genuine interest in Secretary Rh?ne and Member of Parliament Hugues Artois.”

“I even wonder if they’re from the Aurora Order, and one of them is the one who killed Assistant Secretary Tybalt.”

Angoulême chuckled and added, “Since we are barred from thoroughly investigating the member of parliament’s office due to contracts and regulations, why not allow untamed Beyonders, equally keen on prying and employing violence, to squeeze out the pus and expose it to the sunlight?”

“Wouldn’t that pose a problem?” Valentine blurted out.

Amused, Angoulême responded, “Of course not. When dealing with cunning individuals adept at exploiting regulations, we must be even more cunning and find loopholes. If need be, we can even collaborate with secret organizations and unite with wild Beyonders.

“The contracts we hold with members of parliament and high-ranking officials only limit certain actions; they don’t prohibit us from harboring ill intentions or cultivating informants among untamed Beyonders. Such contracts don’t constrain the actions of untamed Beyonders.

“Likewise, these contracts mainly serve as restrictions. They don’t compel us to take certain actions. Sometimes, we can observe events unfold without transgressing the contract while handling things in the usual manner.

“Valentine, even beneath the sun, shadows abound. Consider everyone’s shadows, for instance. You must learn to coexist with them. At times, you must eliminate them, and at others, utilize them to extol the Sun!”

Valentine recalled his collaboration with Lumian in Cordu and reluctantly embraced the deacon’s words. He extended his arms and replied, “Praise the Sun!”

Angoulême added, “I did not craft these words. Ever since Emperor Roselle’s demise, the two Churches, parliament, the government, the military, and Bureau 8 have been embroiled in conflicts. Each has amassed considerable combat experience that would not be deemed aboveboard in any other context.

“Hence, why do you think I silently permit the presence of wild Beyonders amidst the mobs of the market district? Based solely on the reassurances and rhetoric of the superintendents? No, I merely believe they may prove useful at some point.

“Of course, it is everyone’s responsibility to tolerate the convergence of heretics into a large mob. I am no exception. There are advantages and disadvantages to everything.”

Valentine contemplated in silence, refraining from further inquiries.

Similar tensions were apparent in Riston Province, although they paled in comparison to those in Trier. After all, this was the heartland of the nation.

…

During their journey from Underground Trier to the market district, Lumian, having removed his bandages, cast a glance at the silent Jenna and casually remarked, “I thought you’d dispatch Bono Goodville on the spot, subjecting him to unforgettable torment even if he became a ghost. Who would’ve guessed you’d merely stab him in the shoulder?”

Jenna pursed her lips and took a few steps ahead before responding in a hushed voice, “If he dies now, the legal process for accident compensation will drag on for years. It might even be symbolic…”

Though she no longer cared, many people still awaited justice.

Franca subtly nodded and added, “Fear not. Bono Goodville will undoubtedly face the death penalty. The only question is the means. Besides, we have left clues for the official Beyonders. Just as we shield Hugues Artois, we shall always assist in eliminating hidden dangers.”

Jenna offered a sad smile.

“That’s the member of parliament we elected. His secretary and assistant secretary greeted us with an enormous explosion intentionally.”

“Are you afraid?” Lumian mockingly inquired.

Jenna fell silent, momentarily at a loss for words.

Lumian pressed on, “I have never relished the benefits of Intis, nor have I cast a vote. Should I encounter a similar situation, I would not spare the member of parliament’s secretary or even the president who governs this country!

“My sister once said that blood alone can repay blood. I care not for the identity of the bleeding individual.”

Jenna’s expression contorted once more, and she spoke with a tinge of anguish, “My mother always taught me to be kind and embrace forgiveness. I cannot allow

suffering and hatred to dictate my life. That way, I shall never see the light…"

Without waiting for Lumian and Franca to respond, she lowered her head and gritted her teeth.

"But I despise it so much!"

Lumian pursed his lips and stated, "If you eliminate all your enemies, your life shall not be governed by hatred."

Jenna fell silent for a few seconds before giving a terse nod.

"At the very least, at the very least, I shall not let Secretary Rh?ne off the hook!

Franca promptly commended her, "Very good. Maintain this resolve."

She then emphasized, "Of course, revenge cannot be blind or impulsive. You must wait until you are strong enough and seize the opportune moment to act. Otherwise, you shall only bring more harm to your family and friends. Furthermore, you will have to witness your enemy living a good life."

"Alright," Jenna softly replied, nodding.

…

Late at night, Jenna, clad in her usual attire, returned to her home at 17 Rue Pasteur in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, her emotions in disarray.

This place was situated near Rue Saint-Hilaire in the market district and the multitude of factories south of Quartier du Jardin Botanique. Previously, Jenna's family had opted to rent this place for the convenience of Elodie and Julien's work.

Upon opening the door, Jenna was greeted by the sight of her brother, Julien, crouched by the window, his head buried in his hands.

Her heart sank, and her voice quivered as she inquired, "Julien, what's the matter?"

Illuminated by the crimson moonlight, Julien leaned against the old wooden table, wearing an expression of terror.

"Don't fire me! Don't fire me!

"My mother passed away. She really passed away. That's why I didn't come to the factory this afternoon…

"Don't fire me! Don't fire me!

"Mom, Mom, it's all my fault. I shouldn't have left you alone in the ward!

“It’s all on me, entirely!

“Sob!”

Julien broke into tears, resembling a frightened child.

It seemed as though he had lost his sanity.

Jenna stood in the darkness at the doorway, gazing blankly at her brother. It felt as though she was slowly descending into an unfathomable abyss.

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Chapter 250 - 250 Condolence Banquet

250 Condolence Banquet

Julien's sobs reverberated through the room, bathed in the glow of the moon. Jenna stood hesitantly by the door, unwilling to take a single step forward.

Fear gripped her—fear that stepping inside would confirm this as reality and not some dreadful nightmare.

After a while, Jenna shut her eyes tightly and clenched her teeth as she entered the room that served as Julien's bedroom, living space, kitchen, and dining area.

Hunching down beside her brother, she let him cry, not daring to touch him in his state of shock. Softly, she spoke, "We don't have much debt left to settle. Even if we lose our current jobs, we can find new ones. There's no rush…

"You have a solid foundation. There must be other masters out there who would gladly take you in…

"Mom wanted us to have a better life, not to wallow in self-blame…"

Jenna repeated these words again and again until Julien, his spirit shattered, exhausted himself. His body gradually weakened, and he slumped against the wall by the window, drifting off to sleep.

Finally, silence fell.

Watching her brother's face slowly relax, his fear and anguish ebbing away, Jenna let out a silent sigh. Tears welled up in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks.

After shedding silent tears for some time, she rose to her feet and made her way to Julien's bed. Tenderly, she gathered the blanket and draped it over her sleeping brother, leaning against the wall.

Having done all this, she trudged wearily back to the other room. It was her and her mother Elodie's bedroom.

Jenna lay down, her vacant eyes fixed on the dimly lit ceiling, cast in moonlight.

Her mother's words echoed incessantly in her mind, but she couldn't convince herself.

Perhaps, aside from a fortunate few, darkness was the dominant theme in life. Light was but an occasional adornment.

Abruptly, Jenna seized her mother's pillow and pressed it against her face, her body trembling with suppressed sobs.

Why, why is darkness always so overpowering, devoid of light?

When will the sun rise again?

At some point, Jenna succumbed to a deep slumber.

She was startled awake by the commotion outside.

Sitting up, she rubbed her swollen eyes and hastened out of the room.

The sight that greeted her eyes was Julien, toasting slices of bread.

He no longer bore the devastation of the previous night; instead, he was focused on his task.

Jenna's lips quivered for a moment before she finally spoke her customary greeting.

"Why are you up so early?"

Julien responded with a touch of stiffness, "I didn't have dinner yesterday, and my hunger woke me up.

"Just wait a little longer. The toast will be ready soon."

Observing her brother's state, Jenna couldn't ease her worry.

If Julien were still in the midst of a mental breakdown, weeping as he did the night before, she might feel uncomfortable, gloomy, and desperate, but she wouldn't be afraid.

She would compel her brother to meet Franca and have her find a genuine psychiatrist for his treatment.

Yet now, she couldn't be certain if Julien had genuinely recovered or if he was merely presenting a facade of normalcy.

If there were unresolved issues lurking beneath, they could prove catastrophic when they resurfaced!

Jenna feared her brother might leap from a building and end his own life just after they finished breakfast.

Carefully observing Julien for a while, she sensed that his hysterical breakdown had indeed dissipated, but his mind hadn't fully returned to its usual state.

When Julien prepared breakfast, he moved with agility and skill. No issues there. However, during their conversations, he appeared wooden, rigid, and slow to react.

This convinced Jenna that her brother had repressed not only his breakdown and abnormalities but also his thoughts and soul.

Sigh… I still have to find a real Psychiatrist… Jenna's vision blurred once more.

Before long, Julien finished toasting the bread and went to a nearby vendor to purchase a relatively fresh can of milk.

As Jenna nibbled on her breakfast, she pretended indifference and glanced at her brother.

"I couldn't sleep last night, and I felt despondent. I want to see a psychiatrist. You don't seem any better. Would you like to come with me?"

After a brief pause, Julien replied, "I need to job hunt."

A wave of sorrow washed over Jenna once more.

Her brother didn't question her pursuit of a psychiatrist.

People in this neighborhood were reluctant to visit even a regular doctor, let alone a psychiatrist, for mental concerns.

Most of them were unaware of the profession of "psychiatrist" and didn't believe they had any psychological issues.

Considering that seeing a genuine Psychiatrist might require an appointment, Jenna didn't press the matter. After some contemplation, she spoke encouragingly, "I think you should choose your employer and master carefully this time. It's normal not to find a job within a few days. It might take a week, or two, or even a month.

"When the time comes, both of us will have an income. Maybe we can settle the remaining debt within a year. I certainly can't do it alone. The income of an underground singer isn't stable. I never know when my popularity might wane."

On the one hand, Jenna aimed to alleviate the pressure on her brother in advance, so he wouldn't break down again due to the inability to find a job quickly. On the other hand, she emphasized his importance, assuring him that she couldn't do it alone. By relying on his responsibility, she sought to fortify his will to survive and prevent any sudden thoughts of suicide.

Jenna, who had never considered such details the previous day, couldn't help but ponder similar matters today.

Having repeatedly steadied Julien's condition, she watched her brother depart for the gathering spot at Quartier du Jardin Botanique, where factories sought employees and gave opportunities.

After taking a brief rest, Jenna left 17 Rue Pasteur, still feeling somewhat weary, and made her way towards Rue Saint-Hilaire, which was within close proximity.

Her plan was to stroll leisurely towards Rue des Blouses Blanches. It would coincide with Franca waking up, enabling her to persuade Franca to arrange an appointment with a genuine Psychiatrist.

Lost in her thoughts as she passed the intersection, Jenna's gaze swept across the vacant space, catching sight of a newspaper article displayed on a nearby newsstand: "Member of Parliament Hugues Artois Stresses Impartial Handling of Goodville Chemical Factory Explosion."

Intrigued, Jenna was drawn to the words, instinctively stepping closer and picking up the newspaper to swiftly peruse the news.

"…Newly elected member of parliament, Hugues Artois, believes it is unjust to vilify factory owners solely based on accidents. Nor should factory owners, who generate numerous jobs and contribute taxes to the country, face bankruptcy after enduring a mishap. Such circumstances would result in a surge of bankruptcies, heightened unemployment rates, and a fresh wave of protests and turmoil.

"Hugues Artois has expressed his commitment to not forget the injured and deceased in the explosion. He intends to establish a new public welfare fund to assist factory owners in covering a portion of accident compensation, enabling the factories to continue operating. Those responsible for the accident will bear the weight of their sins through increased job creation and tax contributions.

"He further stated his intent to propose a bill at the National Convention, fostering a more favorable environment for entrepreneurs. This would involve streamlined dismissal of unqualified workers and employees, as well as fairer compensation for accidents…"

At that moment, Jenna's shoulders quivered unexpectedly.

She laughed, her body trembling for an extended period.

After a while, she set the newspaper down and resumed her onward journey.

Unbeknownst to her, Jenna arrived at Rue Saint-Hilaire and the partially destroyed Goodville Chemical Factory.

As she gazed at the battered metal tank, thoughts of her mother, Elodie, flooded her mind once again.

She would always gravitate towards that iconic structure upon entering the factory.

A few minutes later, through her blurred vision, Jenna spotted an unfamiliar yet vaguely familiar face.

It was a woman donned in a worn-out dress who said to Jenna, “Hurry, let’s make our way to Avenue du Marché. The member of parliament is hosting a condolence banquet and extending invitations. We might be able to obtain something!”

“A condolence banquet?” Jenna asked, bewildered.

The woman nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, indeed! Your mother was injured in the explosion too, don’t you remember? We met in the ward.

“That member of parliament arrived at the hospital just half an hour ago. There will be a condolence banquet later!”

“Hugues Artois?” Jenna blurted out instinctively.

“Exactly, exactly. That’s the name,” the woman affirmed, grasping the dazed Jenna’s arm and hastening towards the member of parliament’s office on Avenue du Marché.

Half an hour later, they reached the khaki-colored four-story building.

Many individuals dressed like paupers were queued up for inspection, awaiting entry into the hall.

Jenna, wearing a simple grayish-blue dress, let her hair fall naturally over her shoulders without any makeup.

She joined the back of the line and gradually made her way forward.

Nearly fifteen minutes later, it was finally her turn.

A woman in a dark-blue uniform began the inspection, starting with Jenna’s head and proceeding to her boots.

After confirming the absence of any dangerous items, the woman directed her to register and verify her identity before entering the banquet hall.

…

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

Lumian cast a surprised glance at Franca, who had appeared at the door, and exclaimed, “You’re early again today.”

Franca, still donning a blouse, light-colored breeches, and red boots, was now clad in a different ensemble.

She scoffed and retorted, “I’m merely concerned that you and Jenna might outwardly agree, only to carry out an assassination on the Member of Parliament’s secretary, Rh?ne.”

“Am I seen as such a reckless individual in your eyes?” Lumian inquired.

“Yes,” Franca responded without hesitation.

She even contemplated adding the word “most,” but when she recollected a Folk of Rage she had encountered in a seaside town, she felt that Lumian couldn’t be categorized as one.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she continued, “Since you haven’t acted impulsively, Jenna should be safe. I’ll go and visit her, assessing if she requires any assistance at home.”

Just as Franca concluded her statement, hurried footsteps resounded from downstairs, drawing nearer.

Lumian and Franca, positioned by the doorway, turned their heads to behold Jenna, garbed in a simple grayish-blue dress, her hair tousled, rushing over in distress. She sobbed and uttered, “My brother, my brother has gone insane! He’s become a lunatic…”

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Chapter 251 - 251 Giant Tree

251 Giant Tree

Jenna's brother gone mad? Lumian's rage surged.

Not because he was angry with the other party and thought his mental strength too weak to crumble so easily into madness, but because he heard fate's mocking laughter once again.

He noticed yesterday that Julien blamed himself for Elodie's death and showed signs of withdrawing into himself, but that was far from madness. Even if he faced psychological issues in the future, they would be prolonged, not an instant breakdown.

Unless… unless something happened last night that dealt Julien another heavy blow!

Damn fate!

Franca shared the surprise.

Yesterday, she had warned Jenna to keep an eye on her brother's mental state, but she hadn't expected Julien to lose his mind so swiftly.

As far as she knew, he was a resilient young man. He was in good health, and his emotions wouldn't easily be affected or trigger dangerous tendencies. It would be normal for him to isolate himself or indulge for a while, but a complete breakdown in one night seemed unlikely.

Jenna had mentioned Julien's inclination towards extremism, but that was for the sake of their family. With his sister still alive, burdened with debts, and the need to become an underground singer, it was evident that Julien would persist and work hard to share the load until the debts were repaid. If his psychological issues persisted until then, he might collapse or quietly take his own life.

This led Franca to suspect that Julien had been agitated once again the previous night.

She had similar concerns about Jenna's mother's decision to commit suicide, but she refrained from mentioning it to avoid upsetting Jenna.

Franca understood Elodie's feelings and choices, but suicide felt too hasty and impulsive, as if something had influenced her emotions.

Before transmigrating into this world, Franca had read many reports of such nature. She knew that the torment of poverty, self-blame for burdening the family with debts, fear of being incapable of labor, and pure selfless love could drive an optimistic person into a desperate situation, leading them to sacrifice themselves.

However, such matters typically involved a period of internal struggle before they were carried out. After all, everyone had a will to survive and would consider their loved ones' feelings. While it wasn't impossible to commit suicide upon understanding the circumstances, the chances were quite low.

Franca speculated two possibilities. First, Jenna's mother might have been psychologically affected by her physical condition. Second, the explosion at the chemical plant might have been part of the motives of the Member of Parliament secretary, Rh?ne, and others. The subsequent abnormal and widespread emotional fluctuations could be connected to those events.

Is Julien in a similar situation? Franca shifted her gaze to Jenna, who approached Room 207, sobbing.

"What happened?"

"Julien got fired," Jenna said, her expression filled with resentment. "Just because he didn't go to the factory yesterday afternoon. But who thinks of work when their mother has just passed away? After leaving the hospital, he immediately went to his master to request time off, but they handed him a dismissal notice instead. He had been an apprentice there for a whole year!"

"Dammit!" Franca cursed. "Can't they just deduct some money? Are they heartless? Do none of their own family members die?"

"They said it needed to be requested in advance. It can't be done afterward." Jenna wiped her tears. "Julien broke down this morning. He cried like a child, blaming himself and expressing his fear of losing his job. I waited until he was exhausted from crying and fell asleep before rushing over to find you. I went to Rue des Blouses Blanches first but found no one there, so I came here."

As she spoke, her words meandered, as though a flood of emotions had surged within her and needed release.

Franca let out a relieved sigh.

"It doesn't seem too grave. Sounds more like an overwhelming breakdown. Trust me, a genuine Psychiatrist can heal your brother completely. I'll arrange an appointment for you right away!"

As Franca spoke, she turned and headed towards the staircase.

The anger in Lumian's heart intensified.

Forgetting to request time off, getting fired on the very day he made the request, succumbing to new disturbances, and spiraling into madness—it all seemed too coincidental.

Motherf*cker Termiboros!

Motherf*cker Inevitability!

Lumian spun towards Jenna and said sharply, “Let’s pay a visit to the factory owner and your brother’s master!”

Jenna pursed her lips and replied simply, “Okay.”

Lumian walked past her and followed Franca up the stairs, his fiery blue eyes burning with determination.

At that moment, the words of Psychiatrist Madam Susie echoed in his mind: Always remind yourself not to overreact. Whenever you feel a similar surge of emotions, take deep breaths and find your calm…

Lumian took a deep breath, feeling a sense of alarm.

In the face of Jenna’s brother’s madness and fate’s cruel taunts, he should be angered and protest, but he shouldn’t have allowed his rage to consume him completely!

Almost simultaneously, behind Lumian, Jenna’s resentful expression transformed into a calm one. From somewhere, she drew a brownish-green dagger,

resembling a blade fashioned from tree branches instead of metal. Its surface was adorned with bark, arranged in intricate patterns.

With a swift motion, Jenna thrust the dagger towards Lumian’s back.

Reacting swiftly, Lumian twisted his body, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow. The dagger found purchase between his shoulder and back, drawing blood.

Jenna leaped back with agility, while the crimson blood from Lumian’s wound flowed profusely, like crimson fire.

The bark on Jenna’s brownish-green dagger seemed to come alive, greedily absorbing Lumian’s blood.

In that moment, the muscles on Jenna’s face contorted, rendering her unrecognizable to Lumian and Franca.

In an instant, she transformed into an enchanting and ethereal girl, her features captivating.

Lumian’s pupils dilated as he recognized the imposter.

Charlotte Calvino!

Charlotte Calvino, the leading actress of Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons!

Charlotte blended seamlessly with her surroundings, evading Lumian's fiery crimson fireball with ease.

Amidst the thunderous explosion, the door to Room 207 crumbled. The actress chuckled and uttered,

"You regained your senses swiftly. I couldn't eliminate you directly.

"But it matters not. We only require a small portion of your blood."

…

On Avenue du Marché, outside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the member of parliament's office,

Jenna stepped into the banquet hall with bewilderment. Before her eyes lay an array of exquisite desserts, savory dishes, and glasses of vibrant-colored drinks, spread across long tables.

In one corner of the hall, a small symphony band played a soothing melody, accompanied by the sparkling brilliance of a crystal chandelier and the gentle rays of sunlight pouring in through the windows.

Amongst the crowd were individuals clad in brown jackets, linen shirts, and nondescript attire from the market district, appearing rather out of place amidst the opulence of the banquet.

Some stood in a corner, their expressions vacant, while others regarded the luxurious items with resentment. Some consumed food in a state of confusion, while others savored champagne with excitement, relishing the taste of an affair reserved for the upper class.

Instinctively, Jenna retreated to a dimly lit corner, her expression impassive as she silently observed everything around her.

Meanwhile, on the fourth floor of the member of parliament's office.

Hugues Artois, dressed in a black tailcoat and a dark-blue bow tie, his sideburns mottled and his nose prominent, stood behind a window, surveying the market district.

This chaotic and antiquated place belonged to his kingdom.

"Monsieur Member of Parliament, why host a condolence banquet and invite these plebeians?" Rh?ne, wearing gold-rimmed glasses and sporting neatly combed hair, asked in confusion.

Hugues Artois smiled.

“It is the duty of a member of parliament. Before assuming another identity, I must fulfill my obligations.

“Furthermore, by offering condolences and assistance to the grieving people at this time, I will leave a lasting impression in their minds. They may become my loyal followers in the future. When the time comes, their conversion will be easier.”

The red-haired Cassandra chuckled.

“And they shall remain oblivious to the fact that it is you, a member of parliament, who has brought calamity, pain, and despair upon them.

“They will only perceive the care and concern from a high-ranking figure, satisfied by your promises.”

Secretary Rh?ne nodded, a smile playing on his lips.

“In their eyes, Monsieur Member of Parliament is an esteemed figure they can only admire from afar. They dare not approach or question him, let alone harbor suspicions, vent their anger, or harbor hatred.

“As long as there is no organization among them, they will never dare to resist.”

Hugues Artois laughed and declared, “That is precisely why we must sow division among them, fueling their animosity towards each other.”

With those words spoken, Hugues Artois turned his gaze towards the sunlit window and muttered to himself, “Those under the Mother Tree of Desire must have already commenced their actions, I presume…”

…

On Rue Anarchie, just outside Auberge du Coq Doré.

Without warning, the ground split open and the center caved in, catching several vendors off guard. They tumbled into the abyss, their screams abruptly silenced.

A colossal brownish-green tree sprang forth from the depths, its branches spreading in every direction.

Stretching across multiple blocks, it ensnared Auberge du Coq Doré within its leafy embrace.

The eloping couple, amidst their verbal sparring, found themselves once again engaged in their favored pastime. Anthony Reid, the information broker, sought refuge beneath a rickety wooden table, trembling uncontrollably. Meanwhile, Pavard Neeson, the proprietor of the underground bar, reached for his sketchpad, downing a gulp of liquor as he sketched with an expression of deep concern…

The immense brownish-green tree continued to grow, unabated.

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Chapter 252 - 252 Ancient Times

252 Ancient Times

Lumian's fireball missed its target, Charlotte, and in response, countless branches and vines slithered into Auberge du Coq Doré from every direction, entwining the walls, floor, windows, and ceiling. They twisted together in a tangle of brown and green, creating an impenetrable barrier.

In an instant, the entire scene transformed into a surreal illusion before solidifying once more.

Before him stood an immense tree, its shades of brown and green blending together harmoniously. Its roots delved deep into the earth, while its majestic crown reached ever higher towards the heavens.

Lumian's eyes widened as he realized he had been unknowingly transported. It was reminiscent of his previous journeys into Paramita, where he would find himself in a new place without any awareness of the transition.

Gone was Auberge du Coq Doré. Now, his feet trod upon the tangled knots of tree roots that carpeted the ground. His gaze ascended to the colossal tree, reminiscent of ancient legends, as the vast expanse of the sky with its painted-like blue hue and fluffy white clouds loomed above.

The tree's surface was marred by repulsive, damp growths, and each branch appeared to bear the weight of a structure—a building, a road, and other peculiarities.

Auberge du Coq Doré was among them, perched upon a brownish-green tree trunk, intertwined with countless branches and vines, revealing a mere dozen windows to the world.

Through one of the glass windows, Lumian caught sight of the eloping couple engaged in passionate love-making, while the information broker, Anthony Reid, cowered under a wooden table, trembling in fear…

The other tree trunks held objects enshrouded by branches, leaves, and vines, appearing ethereal and hazy, as if they were scenes recorded by a magnetic field through foggy air.

Within this realm, ancient buildings with pediments, herringbone roofs, and lead-framed windows emerged. Women clutching gas street lamps were embraced from behind, priests stood before nude men, and individuals leaped out of glass windows while covering their behinds. Exquisite bodies were carried on trays to

dining tables, orgies unfolded with clothing strewn about, and an evil beauty turned her head to reveal two black goat horns. A bishop naked from the bottom half heard confessions from believers in front of a Sacred Emblem.

The scenes varied in architectural styles, clothing, and hairstyles, some evoking ancient times while others seemed to have occurred just yesterday.

Behind Lumian, crimson Fire Ravens materialized, half-illusory. He swiftly scanned the area, yet Franca was nowhere to be found.

Franca hadn't been transported to this place caught between reality and illusion!

On Rue Anarchie, amidst the tree roots, branches, and vines, street vendors and pedestrians devoured the food they sold. Even after vomiting, they continued to eat with unwavering determination. Some forcefully pinned down members of the opposite sex on the street, others drawing daggers to attack peers who had provoked them or dared steal their spots. In scenes of utter chaos, certain individuals approached glass windows, attempting to entice their reflections into a dance with a gentlemanly bow.

Pedestrians and carriages traversed the streets, seemingly oblivious to the extraordinary circumstances. Vendors continued their lively hawking, and shops remained open. Passersby appeared captivated by the bustling atmosphere, unwilling to depart.

What they failed to notice was the absence of anyone who had entered this area—they had simply vanished, never to return.

…

On the fourth floor of the khaki-colored building that housed the member of parliament's office at Avenue du Marché.

Hugues Artois, lost in thought, gazed out at the nearby streets.

Cassandra, with her fiery red hair, turned back to him and asked with curiosity, "What is Susanna from the Bliss Society planning?"

A smile formed on Hugues Artois' lips as he replied, "They spoke a great deal, but my understanding was limited. I recall them mentioning a plan to submerge the underground divine tree into the depths of Fourth Epoch Trier and extend it into a place called the astral world."

Cassandra, Rh?ne, Margaret, and Boduva exchanged puzzled and concerned glances, unable to hide their confusion.

"But won't that cause a tremendous uproar? Our current strength is far from that of official Beyonders. It's best to avoid a direct clash with them. You might not be aware, but I come from the Sauron family, and I understand the authorities quite well. I know how powerful and formidable they can be.

“Everything we’ve done so far has been in secret, evading investigations as best we could. If we were to be exposed, it’s highly likely that we would face a Saint or a Grade 1 Sealed Artifact. And beyond them, there are angels and Grade 0 Sealed Artifacts.”

Hugues Artois pressed his right hand down and reassured them with a smile.

“Fear not, they won’t implicate us.

“I didn’t incite them to undertake this endeavor. I didn’t even offer a hint or assistance. I can only be considered aware of their plan in advance, silently consenting to their actions.

“The only thing that could potentially link us to this affair is the explosion at the chemical plant that received an excessive amount of decay blessings. However, that occurred because Bono Goodville misunderstood Rh?ne’s intentions and committed an unforgivable crime. The various emotions and desires stemming from the accident were exploited, amplified, and used as nourishment. What does that have to do with us?”

As the team members’ expressions eased, Hugues Artois stepped away from the window, emitting a deep chuckle.

“If they succeed, it will mark another solid step forward in our pursuits. We will be even closer to welcoming the descent of great existences. If they, unfortunately, fail, we will exercise restraint for the time being and strive to ensure that our activities remain hidden from the Beyonders of the two Churches. We will continue to be the rulers of the market district.

“Success or failure, it’s our opportunity.

“During the National Convention’s discussions, I will expose the corruption and mediocre abilities of the Beyonders from the two Churches. They have allowed heretics to repeatedly ravage the market district, each time worse than the last!

“I will request Bureau 8 to establish a branch in the market district to assist the inept Church Beyonders and share their burden.

“Bureau 8, always eager to expand its authority, will surely support my proposal.

“With three different official forces simultaneously present in the market district, conflicts among them will work to our advantage.

“Compared to the orthodox Beyonders of the two Churches, Bureau 8 can be influenced, corrupted, and gradually swayed to our side.

“This is my plan. In the long run, victory will be ours!”

Rh?ne, the secretary with gold-rimmed glasses and neatly combed hair, chuckled.

“That’s my specialty.”

Influencing, corrupting, and gradually decaying an organization, leading to its decline and moral degradation.

Hugues Artois adjusted his tailcoat and bow tie, preparing to leave for the banquet hall.

Before departing, he surveyed his surroundings, his gaze shifting between Cassandra, Rh?ne, Boduva, and Margaret. An unusual sense of confidence and certainty washed over him.

These four subordinates possessed impressive Beyonder powers, with the red-haired Cassandra being particularly formidable, instilling him with a sense of security.

Outside the office door, near the stairs, stood an official Beyonder team tasked with protecting him.

Not every member of parliament received the privilege of a three-man protective team. Some were already powerful Beyonders, while others hailed from noble backgrounds and had their own Beyonder bodyguards. For some, a certain level of personal strength warranted the presence of a Beyonder companion to ensure their safety. It was only someone like Hugues Artois, lacking Beyonder abilities and familial support, who required such protection.

According to the rules, the responsibility of safeguarding Hugues Artois rotated among the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, the God of Steam and Machinery Church, and Bureau 8. Today, it was the turn of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.

In addition to the Beyonders, the entire building housed ten well-trained professional security guards armed with firearms. They were members of Bureau 7, a branch of the Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee—the Special Services Bureau—responsible for providing basic protection to members of parliament and high-ranking government officials.

Standing by the door, Hugues Artois awaited Rh?ne, his secretary, to open it. With a smile on his face, he lifted his head slightly, puffed out his chest, and confidently walked out, descending the stairs.

…

On the ground covered with tangled tree roots,

Lumian surrounded himself with semi-illusory Fire Ravens, once again spotting Charlotte Calvino, the leading lady of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

With a remarkable talent for acting, Charlotte gracefully wandered through the illusory scenes formed by the various tree trunks. Sometimes, she adorned a corset dress and styled her hair in an elegant bun. Other times, she embraced

contemporary fashion, donning a fitted dress, a small coat, and long boots. On certain occasions, she even transported herself to the era of the Sauron royal family, embodying their love for masculine attire and blending seamlessly with the corresponding backdrop.

In this ethereal process, whenever she left one misty illusory scene, she promptly emerged in another, as if leisurely strolling through different eras of Trier.

Beneath the dim glow of the gas street lamps, Charlotte wore a smile as she addressed Lumian, “You should consider yourself honored. You are the first dissident to enter the divine tree and merge with it.”

The crimson Fire Ravens encircling Lumian condensed but refrained from attacking. This was because Charlotte constantly flickered between illusory scenes, altering her appearance with each transition.

Her voice echoed from all directions, forming sentences.

Lumian had already donned black gloves. His right hand was in his pocket, gripping Mr. K’s finger tightly.

Charlotte continued her discourse, introducing the situation as if through an aria, as if it were insufficient to satisfy her inner desires.

This ancient Tree of Shadow predates the construction of present-day Trier. Its roots were buried deep underground.

“It brings delight and sustenance to the people of Trier. With the aid of the devil lineage and devoted followers, the ambiance here gradually transformed according to the deity’s desired path. The people of Trier have never failed it. Both debauchery and pleasure are inherent to human nature. Year after year, they showered it with various excessive desires, providing it with nourishment.

“Over a millennium has elapsed. Although Trier hasn’t reached the expected pinnacle of unbridled joy and indulgence until death, it has taken form. The divine tree’s growth has now reached a crucial crossroads.

“In such a situation, pure desires and emotions can no longer play their primary role. They can only serve as firewood for the fire. We require a sacrifice of considerable magnitude. And you, who possess corruption at the angelic level but lack commensurate strength, are the perfect choice!”

Lumian’s heart skipped a beat upon hearing this. His pupils dilated, as if he wished to see Charlotte’s face clearly.

Does she know that I carry the sealed power of Inevitability within me?

Charlotte grinned.

“The first time you summoned High Priestess Susanna, she sensed the terrifying angelic power sealed within you. She didn’t dare possess you. Her subsequent

attempts to kill you were not solely motivated by Charlie!”

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Chapter 253 - 253 Root of the Problem

253 Root of the Problem

Upon hearing Charlotte's words, Lumian grasped the problem in an instant.

As soon as he reached the market district and attempted his first Summoning Dance, he unintentionally summoned Susanna Mattise, who had been drawn to Charlie, into his room.

At the time, Susanna seemed eager to possess him, but she instinctively sensed the danger lurking within the seal and refrained from acting. This mirrored the behavior of the peculiar creatures Lumian had summoned before. It appeared that only by compelling them would they dare to take hold of him.

Hence, Lumian didn't see anything amiss then. Even when he later encountered Susanna Mattise again and gained deeper insight into the Bliss Society, he failed to connect the dots.

But now, he realized his oversight.

Susanna Mattise was fundamentally different from the strange creatures he had previously summoned!

The dissimilarity didn't lie in her status as a Sequence 5 evil spirit who had failed to attain godhood, but rather in her possession of reason and the ability to think. Besides being extremely fanatical and persistent, she could also lead and develop a secret organization!

When such an evil spirit sensed the tremendously dangerous power sealed within Lumian's body, even if she didn't immediately recognize it as angelic-level corruption, she would have left in confusion and sought revelation from the evil god she believed in!

By the time she grasped the situation, Lumian, possessing the strength of a Low-Sequence Beyonder equivalent to an angel, would be irresistibly appealing to heretics skilled in sacrificial rituals. He would be no less enticing than a hundred million verl d'or abandoned on the street before a Scrooge.

Had it not been for Lumian's quick thinking, temporarily stunning her with Fallen Mercury and deceiving Susanna Mattise during their second encounter, the situation might have reached its conclusion before the official Beyonders arrived.

For Charlie, an ordinary person, to successfully descend from the fifth floor to Lumian's door and seek help despite Susanna Mattise's threats and lingering

presence, it seemed more than just mere luck.

One couldn't trust the words and emotions of an Actor, especially those who were particularly good-looking!

In Charlotte Calvino's performance, Lumian had been scanning the surroundings, hoping to utilize a Hunter's instincts to find an exit from this peculiar space.

Yet, aside from the entangled tree roots blanketing the ground, the colossal slowly-growing brownish-green tree, and the oil painting-like blue sky with white clouds, there was nothing else.

In such an environment, Lumian's Pyromaniac instincts made him stop hesitating. He released his grip on Mr. K's finger and flung it into the air.

Almost simultaneously, the semi-illusory crimson Fire Ravens condensed around him took flight, each tracing an elegant arc as they soared toward the illusionary scene where Charlotte Calvino stood and the fog of the past lingering on the surrounding branches.

Charlotte stepped out of the grand palace, suspected to be a scene depicting Emperor Roselle's affair, and entered the White Maple Palace during the Sauron royal era. There, a Beyonder who had transformed into a man due to a potion but hadn't changed his sexual orientation was scrutinizing the noble ladies' spouses.

The rumbling sounds persisted, yet Charlotte effortlessly evaded the onslaught of Fire Ravens. The fog-shrouded scenes of the past remained unyielding, as if they were truly nonexistent. However, the brownish-green branches that bore them showed signs of scorching and charring.

The Tree of Shadow was, after all, a tree, and thus susceptible to combustion!

The only issue was that Lumian's Fire Ravens inflicted minimal harm upon it.

In an explosive moment, Mr. K's finger detonated like a bomb, transforming into a gruesome rain of flesh and blood that draped Lumian in a hooded robe of crimson.

To Lumian's dismay, Mr. K didn't appear immediately. It was uncertain whether it would take time to sense his presence or if the Tree of Shadow had isolated this space from the real world.

Charlotte ventured into the illusory scene of a torrential downpour, where a few naked figures sprinted about. Her white silk dress seemed drenched, adhering to her body and accentuating her unusually exquisite form.

She bestowed Lumian with a smile, her eyes akin to serene lakes tinged with timidity, innocence, and purity.

A searing flame coursed through Lumian's being, igniting from his head down to his very core.

Lumian's heart surged with longing. He darted between the entangled roots, heading toward the brownish-green tree and the captivating figure of Charlotte Calvino.

Charlotte didn't traverse the various illusory scenes. Instead, she stepped onto a tree branch below and leaned against the brownish-green trunk. Her body trembled slightly, as if yearning to hide but finding no escape.

Lumian's eyes blazed with a reddened fury as his gaze fixated upon Charlotte's sparkling eyes, moist lips, graceful neck, and alluring curves. His thoughts became a chaotic haze.

Thus, he failed to notice Charlotte's abdomen and legs sinking into the brownish-green trunk. He failed to observe the crack forming, unveiling a colossal moist flower.

The vivid red flower bloomed gradually, akin to an enormous mouth anticipating its prey.

Lumian lunged toward Charlotte, propelled by his fervor.

Charlotte couldn't help but smile.

At that very moment, a muffled explosion erupted from Lumian's right pocket.

Boom!

Underneath his blood-colored robe, a ball of flames burst forth, ripping through his pocket and igniting his shirt, causing an agonizing pain to course through Lumian's waist.

Lumian's eyes regained some semblance of clarity. Swiftly, he reached out and grasped Charlotte's wrist, keeping a minimal distance between himself and the moist flower.

Having long been aware of the Mother Tree of Desire's ability to awaken various desires, how could Lumian not have been on guard against Charlotte's seduction?

However, in order to prevent the other party from detecting his defenses prematurely and setting a trap, he chose not to directly soak the Mysticism Smelling Salts in cloth and place it near his nose. Nor did he turn the dagger around, preparing for the collision that would bring him back to his senses. In their current predicament, such methods held little reliability, for Charlotte might not allow him to truly pounce on her.

Hence, Lumian opted to create a small fireball with a delayed explosion in his pocket, all the while gripping Mr. K's finger!

If he remained unaffected and the fireball neared detonation, he could choose to dispel it and create another.

The small fireball inflicted negligible harm upon him. Its primary purpose was to awaken him through pain.

As for the resultant burn injuries, Lumian paid them no heed.

Pyromaniacs held no fear of such trivialities!

In an instant, Lumian seized Charlotte's wrist, and he caught a flicker of fear on her face.

Without delay, two serpent-like crimson flames burst forth from Lumian's palm, searing their way along Charlotte's arm toward her body and head.

Instinctively, Charlotte tilted her neck back, emitting a pained groan as her skin swiftly turned black from the scorching flames.

Just as Lumian was on the verge of engulfing her entirely, a wave of intense danger washed over him.

He attempted to pull Charlotte to the side, but she appeared to meld with the brownish-green tree. No matter how hard Lumian tugged, he couldn't extricate her.

Reluctantly, Lumian abandoned his futile efforts and lunged to his right.

With a muffled thud, a tree trunk as thick as a wine glass descended from the sky, impaling the ground teeming with tangled roots like a javelin, its tip quivering violently.

Lumian glanced upward and beheld Susanna Mattise, her turquoise hair cascading around her, her emerald eyes and scarlet lips.

She possessed a translucent quality, standing amidst the dense and ethereal canopy of the tree, blending seamlessly with it.

Both the brownish-green trunk and the outstretched branches bore colossal wet flowers in pale hues, flourishing and blooming.

…

On Avenue du Marché, inside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the parliament member's office.

In a corner, Jenna observed Hugues Artois, garbed in elegance, leading his secretary Rh?ne and others through the gathering. With a glass of champagne in hand, he offered consolation, made promises, and delivered impromptu speeches with mere words. In response, he received sincere gratitude, unveiled dependence, and instinctive flattery.

Jenna couldn't help but recall a question Lumian had once posed to her: "Do you wish to sit here and watch as the murderers responsible for your mother's death and the destruction of your happiness revel in champagne, indulge in dance parties, and inflict more heartbreak on innocent families?"

Unconsciously, Jenna's fists clenched, her knowledge of the truth fueling an uncontrollable anguish.

However, she understood the need to restrain herself. Acting impulsively wouldn't yield results. She had to endure.

This was because following the proper procedures, she couldn't take action against a parliament member without substantial evidence. And if she desired to seek justice independently, her adversaries boasted several Beyonders who had been bestowed with an evil god's boon and were protected by official Beyonders and armed personnel.

All she could do was endure and await the future!

…

Within the confines of Auberge du Coq Doré, ensnared by branches and vines, Franca stood near the staircase, her face flushed and her eyes glistening as she battled to suppress the overwhelming desire coursing through her veins.

Her right hand trembled as she retrieved the canister of Mysticism Smelling Salts obtained from Rentas. With a twist of the lid, she raised it to her nose.

Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!

A series of sneezes erupted, marking Franca's triumph over her desires and the gradual return of her rationality.

Swiftly scanning her surroundings, she realized that Lumian, who had been mere steps away, had vanished.

Taking note of the unnatural transformations plaguing the motel and the adjacent streets engulfed by colossal trees, Franca clenched her teeth and arrived at a resolution. The tree crowns above seemed to grow increasingly ethereal as they reached skyward, extending into an otherworldly realm.

She retrieved two objects from her possession.

They were a pair of tarot cards.

One depicted a man and a woman raising their cups in a greeting—the Two of Cups. In the center, a wooden staff coiled by twin serpents stood prominently.

The other card portrayed an angel sounding a trumpet, calling forth the resurrection of the departed—the Judgment card!

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Chapter 254 - 254 The Weight of History

254 The Weight of History

Franca clutched the Judgment card tightly and chanted in Hermes, “Rain judgment!”

The ordinary-looking tarot card remained unchanged, but within a few seconds, Auberge du Coq Doré trembled visibly.

The brownish-green branches and turquoise vines that covered the building’s facade receded, as if filled with fear.

Franca’s view through the window expanded. She witnessed the sky merging with the ethereal canopy of a colossal tree. The clouds appeared to be caught in a hurricane, swirling in unison.

As the wind shifted, numerous white clouds gathered, forming a massive vortex that descended to the ground, elongating into a sword-like gust that bridged heaven and earth.

The sword descended, and a figure stood unwavering in the middle of Rue Anarchie.

It was a woman with shoulder-length blond hair, donned in a traditional grayish-white knight’s training attire.

Standing over 1.5 meters tall, her features were exquisite, and her eyes exuded a commanding aura of dignity, demanding submission and obedience.

Rue Anarchie, where she stood, was no longer recognizable. The surrounding buildings, the narrow roads, and the vendors and pedestrians, consumed by their own desires, were divided and scattered across the strange wilderness, blending with the other streets.

Interwoven roots sprouted from the ground, connecting the scattered sections. Radiating from the brownish-green tree at the center, they spread out layer by layer, growing denser as they neared the core.

The streets occupied by the colossal tree remained hidden from the outside world, thanks to this strange wilderness!

Franca let out a sigh of relief at the sight of the short yet dignified lady with blond hair.

Grasping the Judgment and Two of Cups cards, she blurted out, “Praise The Fool! Praise Madam Judgement!”

As soon as the woman known as Madam Judgment landed, her gaze fell upon the side of the brownish-green tree. Unbeknownst to Franca, a cradle-like dark-red open carriage had appeared there at some point. Two towering creatures with goat horns, pitch-black bodies, and burning dark flames pulled the carriage. They seemed to be Demons.

Seated within the carriage was a woman wearing a light-colored veil. She adorned a loose white robe, her slightly swollen belly emanating a tangible maternal glow.

Lady Moon!

The strange wilderness was her Paramita world!

Lady Moon… You have emerged from the rat’s hole… The eyes of Judgment, the blond-haired lady, instantly took on an ethereal quality, as if touched by a golden hue.

Through her eyes, she perceived the intertwining Beyonder powers that existed within the woman on the carriage, manifesting in different colors and states.

“Deprivation!” Madam Judgment’s solemn voice resounded.

It was an ancient Hermes word.

With a simple gesture of her right hand, Madam Judgment temporarily stripped the ability to copulate between creatures of different genders.

Immediately after, Madam Judgment leaned forward, pushed out her palm, and declared in ancient Hermes, “Exile!”

With a whirring sound, an invisible and majestic force coalesced into a terrifying hurricane, howling before Lady Moon.

Unfazed by distance, it materialized directly where the carriage was.

Beneath Lady Moon’s veil, her faintly discernible red lips parted as she took deep breaths.

The exaggerated hurricane, capable of toppling an entire building, seemed to find an outlet in a confined vessel. It surged into Lady Moon’s mouth and permeated her body.

In just a second, the hurricane dissipated into nothingness, completely absorbed by Lady Moon.

With a radiant maternal glow, she extended her right hand, caressing her swollen stomach with tenderness.

…

The cerulean sky and billowing clouds resembled exquisite paintings, while the earth beneath was a realm entwined with tree roots.

Lumian's gaze met Susanna Mattise perched atop the crown of the tree, and they exchanged a knowing look. In an instant, semi-ethereal crimson Fire Ravens materialized around him.

The Fire Ravens circled and soared towards the heavens, but they couldn't breach the ethereal canopy of the tree. They could only approach, their presence without touch.

They alighted upon the brownish-green trunk, scorching it with blackened marks.

Observing this, Lumian swiftly shifted his focus.

He had discovered earlier that flames possessed the ability to inflict certain damage upon the enigmatic entity known as the Tree of Shadow!

Crimson fireballs condensed one after another, hurtling towards the branches of the tree. Yet, they merely singed them without evident impact.

Lumian paused momentarily. Susanna Mattise was preoccupied with something, and Charlotte Calvino had yet to recover from her burns. It was suspected that she had taken refuge within an illusory scene, allowing the crimson flames in his palm to accumulate layer by layer until they transformed into a fist-sized sphere of searing incandescence.

Boom!

The explosion caused by the incandescent fireball was several times more powerful than before, but not a single fragment of the Tree of Shadow's bark fell. Only a larger area of charred flesh and the faint whiff of a colossal light-colored blossom attested to the reality of the incandescent white flame stream.

Lumian's expression turned grave. After a moment of contemplation, a spear formed from blazing white flames materialized in his hand.

He hurled the spear towards the brownish-green tree, witnessing it puncture needle-sized holes in the charred bark before disintegrating into a cascade of flames that spread across various sections of the tree.

Witnessing this, Lumian's heart clenched as he recalled his sister Aurore's favored phrase for describing those who overestimate their abilities to the point of impracticality: "It's akin to an ant attempting to shake a towering oak."

Lumian's anxiety, impatience, and fear compelled him to unleash his fists.

His clenched fists were engulfed in crimson flames.

As he struck the brownish-green tree, a wisp of fire infiltrated its surface.

Fire Infusion!

Lumian sought to bypass the Tree of Shadow's resilient outer bark and directly harm its core.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

His flaming fists pummeled the trunk of the brownish-green tree, as if he aimed to inject every accumulated flame within his being into it.

Bam! Bam! Bam! After a flurry of frenzied attacks, he retracted his fists and took a step back.

Rumble!

A muffled explosion reverberated from within the tree trunk, causing the charred bark to finally crumble away, consumed by flames.

In an instant, an ethereal mist enveloped the scene, as if a long-forgotten beautiful dream had been set ablaze by a match.

Lumian found himself momentarily lost in a haze, as if he had transformed into the protagonist of that dream—a man engaged in a passionate encounter with an enchanting woman wearing an exquisite dress, her hem teasingly lifted.

The unfamiliar sensation felt so vivid that Lumian believed himself to be living it firsthand.

Abruptly, a sharp pain shot through his ankle, snapping him out of the reverie. He discovered numerous branches and vines emerging from his surroundings, stealthily coiling around his feet, their thorns piercing through his blood-colored robe, sinking into his flesh, and greedily drinking his blood.

Lumian grunted, crimson wisps emanating from his body, manifesting into a vibrant cloak of fiery flames that swathed his robe of flesh and blood.

Amidst crackling sounds, the branches and vines ignited, quickly withering into brittle twigs and ashen remnants.

Seizing the opportunity, Lumian swiftly retreated, his gaze fixed upon the wound he had inflicted.

His eyes met the same brownish-green bark, albeit slightly recessed compared to its surroundings.

Beneath the bark… more bark!

Lumian's pupils dilated as he gleaned the gravity of the situation.

The Tree of Shadow had been nurtured by the abnormal desires of Trier's denizens for one to two millennia. Each piece of bark likely represented specific human activities from a particular era, layered upon one another, carrying the weight of history and the subtleties of humanity.

In simple terms, Lumian realized that if he wished to destroy the Tree of Shadow, he would have to confront countless desires accumulated over the span of two thousand years. And he had exhausted his strength to vanquish merely one desire, perhaps one in a billion, or even billions upon billions.

How could he possibly prevail?

Only then did Lumian comprehend the abnormality of his actions.

He had been focused on assaulting the Tree of Shadow instead of seeking an escape route.

An exchange of glances with Susanna Mattise brought forth fear, anxiety, and a deluge of emotions.

No wonder Susanna Mattise allowed me to act freely. No wonder the injured Charlotte Calvino didn't intervene… Lumian had been cautious of the Fallen Tree Spirits and Actors that could evoke desires and emotions, yet he had unknowingly fallen under their sway.

Once more, he raised his gaze and beheld Susanna Mattise, her hair a cascade of turquoise, nimbly shifting positions within the ethereal canopy, uttering an arcane incantation. Charlotte Calvino resumed her enigmatic actions, traversing illusory scenes, her attire, hairstyle, and makeup transforming to mirror various eras. It was no mere performance.

As Lumian's thoughts raced, dizziness assailed him, and his strength rapidly waned.

Such a sensation was foreign to him, but he had subjected others to its effects.

The sedative concocted by the Bliss Society!

Ever the keen observer of his surroundings, Lumian swiftly took out the Mysticism Smelling Salts, his attention drawn to the multitude of pallid flowers adorning the brownish-green tree.

He suspected they were responsible for releasing the sedative gas!

Achoo!

In the midst of his sneeze, Lumian pivoted, intending to distance himself from the Tree of Shadow.

Yet, Mr. K remained absent.

In the blink of an eye, roots emerged from the earth, intertwining to erect a formidable wooden barricade, surpassing ten meters in height, encircling the brownish-green tree and obstructing Lumian's path to freedom.

Lumian halted and pivoted on his heel. Countless fractures marred the trunk, branches, and roots of the Tree of Shadow. Some crevices harbored moist, light-colored flowers, while others resembled cavernous mouths oozing with viscous slime, swiftly elongating toward him.

Trapped with no means of escape, Lumian's lips curled into a smirk.

Without warning, he extended his right hand, pressing it firmly against his left chest. He spoke with a derisive tone, "Termiboros, they truly underestimate your worth. They actually intend to employ you as a sacrifice."

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Chapter 255 - 255 Bridge of Communication

255 Bridge of Communication

Upon learning of the Bliss Society's plan, Lumian's immediate assumption was that Susanna had made a crucial mistake.

What lay sealed within him wasn't just corruption at an angelic level, but an actual angel!

The former lacked self-awareness and reacted on instinct alone. Without undoing the seal and reconnecting it with its true form, it was like a cache of explosives temporarily without a detonator. While there was still a possibility of explosion, Susanna and the other heretics believed they could manage the situation.

By employing the right method, utilizing the isolated environment within the Tree of Shadow, arranging the necessary rituals, and harnessing the evil god's gaze during the sacrificial ceremony, they could break the seal and offer it as a sacrifice to the Mother Tree of Desire, ensuring the angelic corruption wouldn't pose a threat.

However, the true angel possessed intelligence and a strong will. He wouldn't idly stand by while being sacrificed.

Once the seal was completely lifted, could Susanna, Charlotte, and the others truly handle a genuine angel?

One of them was a Sequence 5 evil spirit that required the Tree of Shadow to possess some godhood, while the other was undoubtedly an Actor with an irrepressible desire to perform. As for a true angel, He had to be at least a Sequence 2 for Lumian to address Him as such. In ancient times, They were nearly on par with deities and were considered subsidiary gods. The difference between them was as vast as that between a saint and an ordinary individual.

Initially, Lumian hesitated to use Termiboros as an escape plan, fearing that the sinister and detestable angel would exploit the opportunity to make him do something seemingly innocent on the surface but secretly aid Him in infiltrating more of His powers beyond the seal.

In that scenario, Lumian, Susanna, and Charlotte would meet their doom. The Tree of Shadow would be destroyed or vanish underground, allowing Termiboros to truly descend upon the world.

Left with no other choice, Lumian cautiously stepped onto the steel rope suspended above a metaphorical abyss, hoping to maintain his balance.

One misstep, and he would fall into irreparable oblivion.

As soon as Lumian finished speaking, Termiboros's deep and commanding voice resounded in his ears.

It had been a while since Lumian had heard and resisted the angel's temptation. He could only sense His connection to his own fate through the abnormal occurrences around him or the predetermined events. Yet, the angel hadn't given up and continued to make attempts.

Now, after many days, Lumian once again heard Termiboros's voice, experiencing the full presence of the angel sealed within him.

Termiboros's voice carried a tinge of relaxation and satisfaction as it echoed in Lumian's ears.

"If they underestimate me, it will only aid my escape from this seal.

"This environment is perfect, precisely what I've been waiting for. Even if you perish later and the seal loses its support, the outside world won't detect the corresponding changes and won't be able to prevent me from breaking free of my restraints.

"They may not outright kill you, but once they attempt to shatter the seal and perform their sacrificial act, I will unleash their predetermined fate. I will abandon your body and disrupt their ritual."

Termiboros's words insinuated:

This is the opportunity I've long awaited!

Why should I assist you? Just wait patiently for the inevitable outcome!

Lumian fell into silence and leaped away from his original position.

The tree roots split apart, and a massive, damp, pale flower blossomed, one after another, as if the abyss itself had yawned open.

Achoo!

Lumian inhaled the Mysticism Smelling Salts once more, dispelling his drowsiness.

He gazed up at Susanna Mattise in the sky and erupted into wild laughter.

"Haha, you're the most dim-witted bunch I've ever encountered!

“You’ve set up this ritual without a clue. Did your brains empty out because of your faith in the Mother Tree of Desire, or have they been filled with various liquids?

“Let me enlighten you. What’s sealed inside me isn’t corruption at the angelic level, but a bona fide angel. His name is Termiboros!

“As soon as that seal is undone, He shall descend upon us and slaughter you all. He’ll shatter this foul, wretched fallen tree and cast it into a cesspool!

“If I were you, I’d cease this ritual now and let me go!”

Susanna Mattise, continually shifting positions within the illusory tree canopy, looked down at Lumian and smiled.

“Are you bluffing again? Bluffing seems to be your favorite pastime. I fell for it once; I won’t be fooled again.”

Not far from her on a branch, one of the few windows on the surface of Auberge du Coq Doré, entwined with vines and branches, reflected the figure of the playwright Gabriel.

He frantically penned his name on a piece of paper with a fountain pen, as though a renowned author signing autographs for avid readers.

He had succumbed to the allure of his script, Lightseeker, gaining fame and becoming a household name.

Susanna Mattise continued, “Furthermore, we’ve contemplated the possibility that it’s not corruption but an actual angel.

“Therefore, with the divine revelation, we’ve altered a crucial segment of the ritual. We will employ you as the primary sacrifice, together with the seal and the angel, to offer them to the mighty Mother Tree of Desire. It won’t hinder the final outcome.

“Sacrificial rituals are not like cooking, where ingredients are transformed into dishes. Our task is to present the offerings to the deity. As for what befalls you, along with the seal and the angel within, it is for the great Mother Tree of Desire to decide.

“Why do you think I refrained from truly attacking you? Such an action might have prematurely shattered the seal!

“Don’t even entertain the notion of threatening me with suicide. I shall imbue you with an ardent desire to live.”

It seemed as though Termiboros was akin to a valuable gift that would break free of its own accord. The seal was like a locked box, and Lumian himself was the exquisite wrapping. Susanna and Charlotte had no intention of unwrapping the

box and presenting the gift to the Mother Tree of Desire. Instead, their plan was to offer the box and its packaging to the deity, avoiding any significant risks.

Upon hearing Susanna Mattise's words, Lumian remained unfazed—neither surprised, nor fearful, nor disappointed.

He tilted his head slightly and directed his gaze towards his left chest, a smirk forming at the corners of his mouth.

"Termiboros, did you hear that? You're going to be packaged up and offered to the deity known as the Mother Tree of Desire. You won't get a chance to escape that seal.

"I'm not sure how the Mother Tree of Desire will deal with you, but I can assure you it won't be anything pleasant. Are you really content to wait for the final outcome as a mere bystander?"

This time, Termiboros didn't immediately respond to Lumian. After a few seconds, His resonant voice reverberated, "Draw your Fallen Mercury and plunge it into the trunk of the Tree of Shadow. Pierce through its second layer of bark."

Lumian was taken aback.

"The fate of the Tree of Shadow can also be exchanged?"

Termiboros's voice regained its grandeur.

"It wasn't possible before, but now it is. That tree possesses a certain living characteristic. It's akin to a mythical treant that hasn't fully developed its intelligence."

Without hesitation, Lumian extended his left hand, passing through the crimson-flaming cloak and robe made of flesh and blood. He grasped the pewter-black dirk adorned with sinister patterns.

Bending his body slightly, engulfed in flowing crimson flames, he sprinted toward the trunk of the Tree of Shadow, swift as a cheetah. Along the way, he leaped agilely, evading the cracks and blooming gigantic flowers.

Observing Lumian's new course of action, Susanna Mattise didn't pay too much heed. She didn't believe he could truly harm the Tree of Shadow or her. Nevertheless, she remained cautious. She intended to kindle his desires and fabricate corresponding illusions, luring him to "unite" with a certain flower or crevice in the tree.

Susanna Mattise's emerald eyes reflected Lumian's figure, draped in a robe of flesh and blood and adorned with a flaming cloak. Moisture welled up in her eyes instantly.

She had hoped to witness Lumian abruptly changing his direction and pouncing upon the colossal light-colored flower. Yet, Lumian appeared unaffected as he

charged toward the brownish-green trunk.

Beneath the flaming cloak, Lumian clutched the Mysticism Smelling Salts in his right hand, holding it close to his nose.

Tears welled in his eyes, obstructing his sneeze. However, with the aid of the Alms Monk's endurance, he managed to endure it.

Susanna Mattise was puzzled. With her level and Sequence, even if the other party repeatedly sniffed the Mysticism Smelling Salts, he shouldn't remain completely unaffected.

Under normal circumstances, given the disparity in their strength, she could easily induce Lumian to sneeze while he searched for light-colored giant flowers or brownish-green crevices and continued inhaling the Mysticism Smelling Salts.

Of course, there was a possibility of failure in such situations, but it was unquestionably lower than the probability of success.

But now, Susanna Mattise's initial attempt had proven futile. It was as if a skilled dice thrower had surprisingly rolled the lowest number.

Achoo!

Lumian let out a loud sneeze.

Seizing the moment while his mind remained clear and Susanna hadn't exerted her influence a second time, he shielded the metal canister with his right finger and thrust the Fallen Mercury at the brownish-green trunk of the Tree of Shadow, aiming for the needle-sized hole he had created with the burning-white spear.

A resounding clang echoed as Fallen Mercury failed to penetrate any deeper, as if it had struck an impenetrable iron plate.

Achoo!

Lumian, having inhaled a substantial amount of the Mysticism Smelling Salts, sneezed once more, shaking off yet another desire incited by Susanna. Her attempts faltered once again.

Lumian's right hand, gripping the metal canister, surged with crimson flames.

It absorbed the engulfing cloak of fire that adorned his body, swiftly condensing into a blazing white boxing glove.

In the next instant, Lumian raised his right fist and hammered it against the hilt of Fallen Mercury, resembling a blacksmith forging a weapon.

A thunderous boom erupted as the incandescent white boxing glove detached from Lumian's hand and detonated at the rear end of Fallen Mercury.

Boom!

Lumian’s left palm, holding the dirk, was charred and mangled in several places. As for Fallen Mercury, propelled by the force of the explosive impact, it managed to break through the first layer of bark and penetrate into the core trunk of the Tree of Shadow.

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Chapter 256 - 256 Crack

256 Crack

The searing pain in Lumian's left palm from the explosion nearly caused him to instinctively draw his pewter-black dirk, which had already been plunged into the core trunk of the Tree of Shadow.

Drawing upon his resilience and experience with similar injuries, he fought to control his body's reflexive reactions.

As his mind cleared from the stimulation, he managed to shake off the two desires imposed by Susanna Mattise.

Pain and rationality entwined, engulfing his mind, followed by a terrifying torrent of scenes.

These were the accumulated experiences of the Tree of Shadow over the past millennium, countless fragments of desire that had nourished and formed its trunk. They represented the potential futures of this malevolent tree.

They converged in a mercury-colored illusory river, flooding Lumian's thoughts like a deluge.

Not only were there an overwhelming number of scenes that could overpower any Low-Sequence Beyonder, but some scenes compelled Lumian to instinctively ignore or overlook them, unable to muster the courage to look or discern.

Just when he thought his intellect would be crushed by the immense torrent and reduced to a blank canvas, he realized that he had endured it. It was as if there existed an additional space capable of accommodating countless scenes beyond the limit.

Lumian wasted no time in choosing the fate he wished to exchange. Guided by his intuition for danger and spiritual instincts, he selected a scene:

A brownish-green root extended towards the depths of an ancient structure, devoured by an unseen flame that silently burned in the darkness, casting an eerie glow over the area.

With a crack, the tree root snapped and descended into the shadows. Purple flames surfaced, swiftly transforming into a color indistinguishable to the naked eye. In an instant, it dissipated, leaving no trace behind.

Lumian withdrew Fallen Mercury and exerted all his strength to pry open this fate, but it remained unresponsive.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

Brownish-green tree trunks, not excessively thick, hurtled towards Lumian like javelins precisely thrown by a platoon of soldiers.

Each one possessed the potential to impale and skewer a target upon the gnarled tree roots.

In the ethereal canopy of the tree, Susanna Mattise's emerald eyes widened as she attempted to employ various abilities related to desires—be it for sex, food, greed, or acting—but all in vain. Opting for the tree spirit's powers, she aimed to deliver a physical blow.

Bound to the Tree of Shadow, the methods available to her were far more potent than those of her counterparts who relied on ordinary trees as companions.

Though she still doubted that the so-called Cursed Blade could harm the Tree of Shadow, Lumian's confidence and performance left her somewhat uneasy. Subconsciously, she believed it wiser to disrupt whatever he was doing.

She would rather err on the side of believing it to be seriously harmful and take excessive precautions in advance than be careless and witness unforeseen changes and the possibility of failure.

The former would at most waste a certain amount of strength and energy, delaying the completion of the ritual a little. The latter might bring about changes she didn't want to see and an outcome of failure.

Even if the probability was low, she had to take preventative measures. She couldn't wait until it happened before attempting to rectify it.

The flesh robe enveloping Lumian's body abruptly contracted, diminishing his size and evading the majority of the javelin-like tree trunks.

Two of them landed on Lumian's left and right shoulders, leaving him unable to dodge or evade.

The flesh and blood constituting the robe acted as disciplined soldiers receiving an order. They surged towards the impending strike, constructing layers of blood-colored cushions.

With a resounding impact, the layers of flesh were pierced by the two brownish-green tree spears. More flesh surged forth, hurriedly filling the void.

Although Mr. K's finger had transformed into a robe of flesh and blood to mitigate the damage, Lumian's legs buckled under the force akin to that of a sledgehammer, causing him to tumble backward.

In that moment, he felt the fate of the brownish-green tree root, which had been burned by the invisible flames, loosen its grip.

The illusory power prying it loose didn't solely belong to Lumian, but also to his left chest, emanating from an unknown source.

Gritting his teeth, Lumian utilized the momentum of his fall to laboriously stir up that fate. With great difficulty, he transformed it into a droplet of mercury and exchanged it with the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost, stored within the pewter-black dirk.

With a crisp crack, fractures spread across Fallen Mercury, as if it struggled to bear the burden of fate. Some fractures were unnaturally long, others were delicate, and some ran straight through the blade.

With a thud, Lumian collapsed onto the coiled tree roots entrenched in the ground, freeing himself from the lingering forces of the brownish-green tree javelins.

His shoulder throbbed with pain, but he remained physically unharmed. The robe woven of flesh and blood began to disintegrate, trickling down, obstructing the pale-colored flower and the brownish-green crack as they unfurled their "mouths" in an attempt to devour Lumian. When he collapsed, he crushed them.

With a resounding boom, crimson flames erupted, consuming the malevolent entities. Seizing the opportunity, Lumian swiftly rolled over and maneuvered to a relatively safe position.

Only then did Lumian recall a crucial issue. Amidst dodging attacks from trees, branches, leaves, vines, roots, and flowers, and taking whiffs of the Mysticism Smelling Salts, he whispered amidst sneezes,

"Encountering the Montsouris ghost… Achoo! …doesn't necessarily mean that the Montsouris ghost will attack immediately!"

If it took a while, what was the point of his previous efforts?

Disregarding the fact that the Montsouris ghost would assault the Tree of Shadow every month or two, even if it attacked every four to five minutes, Lumian found it despairing. When the time came, the preparations for the ritual would surely be complete. The sacrificial ceremony would have already commenced. Under the watchful eyes of the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, there was a high likelihood that the Montsouris ghost would choose to wait a while before returning, based on its previous patterns.

Termiboros's majestic voice resonated within Lumian's body and ears once again.

"It approaches. It is a destined fate."

In the ethereal canopy of the tree, Susanna ceased her attacks on Lumian. Utilizing the Tree of Shadow, she remotely guided Charlotte in controlling the sacrifice

while delving her consciousness into the brownish-green tree, searching for any potential issues resulting from the pewter-black dirk's assault.

The sooner she discovered it, the sooner she could resolve it and propel the sacrificial ritual forward!

Upon hearing Termiboros's words, Lumian couldn't help but inquire, "Can the Montsouris ghost truly destroy the Tree of Shadow?"

Although both entities were malevolent, the giant tree that had been rooted in Trier's soil for over a thousand years, nourished by countless desires, and linked to a hidden evil god, appeared loftier, more menacing, and more wicked.

Termiboros's deep voice resounded, "No. However, it possesses the ability to influence the Tree of Shadow to some extent, creating an opportunity for you to escape."

Just as Termiboros finished speaking, Lumian caught sight of a sudden black shadow beside him.

The figure stood slightly hunched, resembling an elderly man burdened by the weight of life.

The Montsouris ghost!

It had bypassed numerous restrictions and obstacles to arrive in the alternate space occupied by the Tree of Shadow.

With a single stride, the stooped figure reached the edge of the brownish-green trunk. Susanna and Charlotte noticed its presence.

They instinctively sensed a threat, yet they didn't connect the black shadow to Trier's legend of the Montsouris ghost.

Frantically, they stirred up the various desires of the Montsouris ghost, but their efforts were like stones cast into an unfathomable abyss. There was no response whatsoever.

For the first time, Lumian beheld the true appearance of the Montsouris ghost.

It was neither an elderly man nor even human. It more closely resembled a viscous black shadow taking on a human form, hunching its back.

The Montsouris ghost fixed its gaze upon the Tree of Shadow for two seconds before pressing itself against the brownish-green trunk.

In an instant, it transformed into a malevolent, pitch-black liquid that corroded the layers of tree bark.

A sizable pool of moist darkness spread across the surface of the massive tree trunk, steadily contaminating its surroundings and expanding its reach.

Within moments, the entire lower portion of the Tree of Shadow was overtaken by the black shadow, rendering Susanna Mattise and Charlotte Calvino's attacks futile.

The next second, the oil-painting-like blue sky and white clouds, along with the ground intertwined with tree roots, trembled visibly as if experiencing a violent earthquake.

Faint illusory cracks appeared on the surface of the tree trunk, the ground, and even in the sky. Some of them slowly widened, revealing glimpses of the street beyond—a distorted microcosm of chaos influenced by branches, vines, and desire.

"Be prepared," Termiboros's grand voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

Realizing that she couldn't halt the Montsouris ghost and that the situation was rapidly deteriorating, Susanna Mattise wore a resentful expression and recited an incantation in ancient Hermes, "Son of the God who should never have been born, you are a cage for the imprisoning curse, an evil that erodes history. I implore your assistance."

The instant Susanna Mattise finished speaking, the branches beneath the ethereal tree crown began to "secrete" a viscous, pitch-black liquid.

It bore a striking resemblance to the black liquid assumed by the Montsouris ghost, but there was a significant distinction. It possessed a greater degree of chaos, frenzy, and wickedness.

Almost simultaneously, pale-white, malformed skulls, yellowish eyeballs entwined with thick veins, scarlet tongues dripping with repulsive pus, and indescribably grotesque objects that induced madness by mere sight sprouted from the liquid secreted by the tree trunk.

…

In the untamed wilderness, where Madam Judgment and Lady Moon engaged in their fierce battle, Rue Anarchie and other locations lay scattered. The brownish-green tree swayed ominously, while tiny cracks that appeared to pierce the very fabric of reality spread across its surface and surroundings.

Suddenly, an illusory door materialized in the sky, layer upon layer.

From the midst of these doors emerged a lady clad in an orange dress, her appearance exuding a languid aura. Worms emitting resplendent starlight wriggled in and out of her visage, obscuring her true features from discernment.

With purposeful strides, the woman approached the brownish-green tree, extending her hands to grasp the sides of an invisible crack, as if intent on tearing it open!

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Chapter 257 - 257 The Unfortunate

257 The Unfortunate

Transparent maggots, shimmering under the starlight's embrace, wriggled out from the lady's relaxed palm, their movements concealed within an elusive crack. The crack, once invisible, now bore the hue of starlight.

With a vigorous pull, the transparent veil veiling this world let out a terrifying groan, unable to bear the weight. It parted forcefully, yielding to the unstoppable momentum.

Amidst an indescribable shattering, the crevice ripped apart, transforming into a colossal cavity adorned with glimmering starry specks.

It resembled the entrance to a tunnel leading to an unknown realm.

In a mere instant, the woman in the orange dress vanished from the wilderness.

Seated within the cradle carriage, Lady Moon's expression flickered. She commanded the Demon-like creatures pulling the carriage to follow her into the tunnel.

Madam Judgment trailed closely behind.

…

In a world where tree roots intertwined and ethereal clouds resembled oil paintings.

As the branches of the otherworldly tree secreted viscous black liquid and peculiar entities sprouted, Lumian felt his mind teetering on the edge of madness, despite Termiboros's warning not to gaze skyward.

His skin prickled, and the flesh beneath twitched unnaturally, as if masses or tumors were about to form.

At that moment, pure starlight bathed the world, casting its radiance upon Lumian's eyes.

Not far from him, a minuscule crack instantaneously expanded into a mystical and enigmatic door of starlight.

"Shut your eyes and rush through the doorway," Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian clutched Fallen Mercury tightly with his bloodied left hand and sprinted toward the starlit door.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Lumian relied on a Hunter's instinctual understanding of spatial location and precise distance, reaching his destination within a few strides. Unperturbed by the changes around him or the lurking dangers, he leaped into the unknown.

After a brief bout of dizziness, Lumian sensed as though he had ascended from the depths of a profound lake, his entire being easing.

He opened his eyes and beheld the brownish-green silhouette of the Shadow Tree not far away, Auberge du Coq Doré, and other buildings cloaked in branches and vines. He witnessed streets divided by peculiar forces in various sections of the wilderness, merchants and passersby indulging in their individual desires, and Franca gracefully leaping from a second-story window of Auberge du Coq Doré.

He had departed from the alternate realm within the Tree of Shadows, yet he had not returned to the tangible world.

Franca also caught sight of Lumian nearby. She exclaimed with excitement, "Hurry, find the exit!"

Although she had "summoned" Madam Judgment and felt a measure of confidence, she desired no lingering stay in this place.

How could a mere Sequence 7 like herself partake in a battle involving demigods? Even observing from a distance posed significant risks.

Lumian nodded and sprinted toward Franca, scanning his surroundings for any signs of an exit.

The more he surveyed, the more he sensed the resemblance to Paramita, a boon from the Great Mother. However, there were no hordes of undead or Demons casting sinners into the abyss.

Could it be that the Bliss Society's operation involved the followers of the Great Mother? Lumian swiftly formed a hypothesis and shouted to Franca, who was mere inches away, "To the edge of the wilderness!"

Drawing from his experience, if this place was indeed Paramita, they should be able to escape from the wilderness's periphery.

Franca nodded slightly and followed, without questioning his instruction.

Suddenly, the wilderness convulsed with a violent quake, and a low rumble echoed from within the brownish-green tree.

The sky darkened, and the world itself teetered on the brink of collapse.

The branches and vines that had ensnared the buildings and streets swiftly withdrew. Vendors, pedestrians, and residents, caught in the grip of their desires, snapped out of their dazed states.

They ceased their ravenous feasting, released their grip on their partners, and rose in fear. Bloodied and bewildered, they halted their savage violence and looked around in a state of confusion…

In Auberge du Coq Doré, the bickering eloping couple ceased their romp. Oblivious to the wrongness of their actions, they were perplexed as to why the sky had darkened so drastically, as if evening had descended upon them.

Anthony Reid, trembling beneath a wooden table, regained his composure. He emerged and peered out the window, his expression darkening.

Gabriel, who had been frantically signing his name, suddenly regained his senses. He wondered if the stress had taken its toll on his sanity while he polished the Lightseeker script, incorporating the theater manager's feedback.

Pavard Neeson, owner of the underground bar, set aside his paintbrush but couldn't tear his gaze away from the drawing board. Though he had only sketched it hastily, he felt it was the most remarkable work he had ever produced. It surpassed even his loftiest standards. Unconsciously, he yearned to return to that state, but he couldn't.

In the blink of an eye, all the branches and vines retracted into the Tree of Shadows. Most of the vendors, pedestrians, and residents, who had regained their senses, beheld the ominously terrifying brownish-green tree.

They didn't understand what had transpired, but fear propelled them to swiftly flee from the Tree of Shadows, heeding their instinctual warnings.

In that moment, Susanna Mattise, her turquoise hair flowing, materialized atop the ethereal tree crown. Below her stood Charlotte Calvino, wearing an expression of disappointment, frustration, and hatred.

The escape of the sacrificial offering signaled a temporary failure in their sacrifice. They promptly departed the alternate realm to evade the repercussions of the demigod-level clash.

Susanna Mattise, beset by the backlash and the influence of godhood, appeared increasingly ethereal, as if she could dissipate at any moment.

Lumian and Franca, racing toward the wilderness's edge, flickered in her weakened gaze, yet she lacked the power to influence them.

Under normal circumstances, her fusion with the Tree of Shadows granted her the ability to exert her powers from a distance. However, the backlash from the interrupted ritual and the uncontrolled corruption following the Son of God's descent had nearly claimed her life. She was now in an extremely feeble state.

The tenacious and evil spirit that she was, Susanna Mattise refused to surrender so easily. She yearned to capture Lumian and drag him back into the Tree of Shadows to resume the unfinished ritual.

Once again, the branches and vines of the Tree of Shadows swiftly extended, ensnaring a hapless vendor and hoisting him aloft. Their thorns pierced his flesh, absorbing the vital essence that could rejuvenate Susanna.

It was akin to utilizing the Tree of Shadows to enter a dream-like state, draining energy to gradually lead the target to their demise through a sinister encounter. However, the process had become crude and expedited—an accelerated ordeal!

Vendors, pedestrians, and residents trapped within the wilderness erupted in terrified screams as they frantically fled upon witnessing the surge of brownish-green branch and vine monstrosities and their companions being hoisted into the air.

The eloping couple, wrapped tightly in a blanket, darted out of Auberge du Coq Doré, following in Anthony Reid's wake toward the wilderness's edge. Behind them trailed Gabriel, Pavard Neeson, and the tenants who hadn't yet departed for work. Before them swarmed vendors and pedestrians in a chaotic scramble.

One by one, fleeing escapees were snatched up by tree branches and vines, their cries for help piercing the air.

The peddler, who had once served Lumian extra Whiskey Sour, stumbled over a rock on the ground. In utter despair, he witnessed turquoise vines creeping up his body, layer upon layer, engulfing him entirely.

Sensing the commotion, Lumian turned his head and fixated on the scene for several seconds before gradually slowing his pace.

Upon witnessing this, Franca cursed, "Do you plan to go back and save them? Dammit! Know your place. You're just a wanted criminal, a mob leader!"

Lumian didn't come to a halt, but he didn't hasten his steps either.

He and Franca drew ever nearer to the edge of the wilderness.

In that very moment, Lumian's ears resonated with the majestic voice of Termiboros.

This time, the angel of Inevitability did not deliver sentences one by one. Instead, He injected a lengthy paragraph into Lumian's consciousness at intervals.

"Have you not come to terms with your destiny?

"After enduring the might of Inevitability, there shall naturally be a corresponding corruption.

“From the moment Cordu was obliterated, you became the unfortunate one.

“It was not I who exerted influence over you in many past matters; rather, it was your hapless fate playing its part.

“As an unfortunate soul, not only shall you suffer ill fortune, but so too shall those around you and those close to you.

“If it were not for your lack of knowledge in mysticism, which allowed Susanna Mattise to uncover the issue within your body and begin contacting Hugues Artois about employing the chemical plant explosion for the sacrificial arrangement, Jenna’s mother would not have taken her own life, and Jenna’s brother would not have descended into madness.

“If you had been cautious enough, when Flameng regained consciousness and drank with you, you would have remembered to seek an opportunity to engage a genuine psychiatrist. He may not have chosen the path of suicide.

“If you had not merely forewarned Ruhr, but also restricted his movements, he would not have succumbed to the illness once more and met a swift demise. Michel would not have lost her will to live.

“All this misfortune has been brought upon them by you.

“My existence is not solely a trump card that grants you boons and the power to deter others, but also an inescapable curse.

“Only by bowing to Inevitability and releasing me from my seal can your misfortune come to an end.

“If you continue on this path, you shall be unable to save those whom you wish to save. You shall be unable to protect those whom you wish to protect. You shall only amplify their misfortunes.

“When the time comes, those pleading for help here shall perish.

“Gabriel shall perish.

“Charlie shall perish.

“Jenna shall perish.

“Franca, too, shall meet her demise.”

Lumian came to a sudden halt, his countenance twisted in anguish. He could no longer conceal the pain that consumed him.

Franca called out once more, “Get a grip! It’s all well and good to do good deeds when everything is fine. But now, we need to escape and seek help from official Beyonders! Who knows what will come of those demigod battles? Susanna is now

like an empowered Sequence 5 with some godlike abilities. She's not someone we can handle!

"Those people don't expect assistance from a villain who enjoys playing pranks on them!"

In the vicinity of the brownish-green tree, numerous individuals already dangled from its branches.

With a swoosh, Gabriel was hoisted up by a few green vines, and the scattered pages of the Lightseeker script fluttered to the ground.

Pavard Neeson, the owner of the underground bar, stood beside him, his body impaled by a protruding spike.

Among the eloping couple, the woman stumbled and ran slower, eventually tripping over a branch and becoming ensnared by the vines.

The young man wrapped in a blanket grew alarmed and continued onward. However, after a few steps, he abruptly halted, cursing himself.

"Dogsh*t!"

Before he could finish his sentence, he had already spun around and dashed back toward his partner. Clenching his teeth, he sought to tear at the vines and help her free.

Desperate cries and terrified screams reverberated through the wilderness.

Lumian's fists clenched involuntarily.

Suddenly, he let out a chuckle and spoke.

"Then, are you considered close to me? After all, you reside within my body. Will you also encounter misfortune?

"I know I will face countless failures, yet I will persist again and again in pursuit of that elusive and seemingly insignificant hope!

"If I had chosen to surrender, I would have been defeated long ago!

"And now, there is still a chance for success."

With that, Lumian took another step and continued his sprint toward the edge of the wilderness.

Although Franca couldn't comprehend his mutterings, she was glad to see that he had made a wise decision.

Two to three seconds later, the two of them reached the wilderness's edge. Lumian deliberately maintained a distance from Franca, then suddenly extended his arms

and pushed her out.

Caught off guard, Franca watched in shock as her body gradually left the wilderness. She turned to gaze at Lumian.

Lumian smiled and spoke gently, “Once, I shared their despair, pain, and longing for aid. And during that time, someone extended a helping hand to me.”

With those words, he pivoted and sprinted toward the brownish-green tree.

In the dim expanse of the wilderness, crimson flames ignited upon his body. This time, the fiery cloak no longer isolated him from his garments, scorching his skin and flesh.

He intended to use the constant pain to resist the diverse desires he would encounter next!

As he ran, his gaze locked onto Susanna, her turquoise hair entwined. Yet, he “saw” not only the Fallen Tree Spirit, but also the figure etched in his memory.

The one who had illuminated his path.

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Chapter 258 - 258 Assassin

258 Assassin

Susanna's eyes fixed on Lumian as he dashed towards her, his body engulfed in crimson flames. She absorbed energy from the surrounding crowd, including peddlers, pedestrians, and tenants hanging from the trees. Her goal was to restore her combat abilities as quickly as possible.

She wasn't worried about Lumian causing her harm. Positioned at the top of the tree crown, she knew he couldn't reach her. Moreover, she was one with the Tree of Shadow, making her nearly invulnerable. Without godhood, any attack would only cause minor injuries, incapable of killing or severely harming her.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Lumian sprinted into an area where tree branches and vines entangled, with a hundred to two hundred humans dangling from above.

The brownish-green foliage tried to ensnare and pierce him, but his fiery aura forced them to retreat in panic.

Suddenly, a rumbling sound shook the ground. The brownish-green tree descended rapidly, shrinking its height to seven to eight meters.

The violent tremors across the wilderness made it difficult for Lumian to advance.

…

Rumble. A tremor like an earthquake shook the crystal chandelier in the banquet hall. Terrified expressions appeared on the faces of most people present. Quick-thinking individuals sought shelter under the long table draped in a white tablecloth.

The team assigned to protect Hugues Artois consisted of Imre, a mixed-blood individual, Valentine, and a Warrior pathway Beyonder named Antoine.

Sensing the anomaly simultaneously, they tacitly sent Imre to investigate. He rushed to the window and peered out, trying to locate the source of the disturbance.

Imre observed that several houses in Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches had tilted to a certain degree, but they had not collapsed. Their surfaces were covered with brownish-green branches and vines.

In comparison, the prominent feature was the brownish-green tree, situated roughly on Rue Anarchie. It descended, adorned with numerous tree tumors and

flowers.

The scene lasted only a few seconds before returning to normal, as if an unsuccessful painting had been replaced by another work.

“What’s happening?” Hugues Artois calmly approached the window and inquired.

Imre didn’t hold back any information. He lowered his voice and replied sincerely, “Anomalies have occurred on Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches.”

Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, Rue des Blouses Blanches… As Jenna, who had approached a nearby window but missed witnessing the scene, heard the street names, her feet froze in place.

Two names immediately surfaced in her mind: Ciel, Franca…

Had they encountered the anomaly? Jenna’s heart sank, and she instinctively looked at Hugues Artois.

She noticed a curl forming on the member of parliament’s lips, as if he couldn’t hide his delight.

It’s him… It’s him and his group of heretics! Jenna’s mind instantly reached a conclusion. Darkness enveloped her, and despair surged through her uncontrollably.

Could Franca and Ciel withstand the planned attack by the heretics and survive this anomaly?

Should I rush to their aid with my current strength? Or will I only bring harm to them?

At that moment, Jenna felt as if the pillars supporting her—her two friends who had always stood by her side—were about to crumble, just as she had lost her mother.

And it was all the fault of the heretics, of Hugues Artois!

Her thoughts drifted to Franca’s words when she consumed the potion and transformed into an Assassin, warning Jenna to avoid contact with evil gods.

“Contact with evil gods will bring nothing but disaster.

“Not only will it drive a person to madness and strip away their true self, but it will also drag everyone around them into darkness, whether they know them or not.

“If we don’t eliminate those individuals, the influence of the evil gods will persist. The pain will return again and again, unending.”

And now, Hugues Artois stood at the center of all the market district's disasters.

Jenna lowered her head, unable to meet Hugues Artois's gaze, afraid that her eyes would betray the pain and hatred within.

Hatred consumed her!

Yet, she could only remind herself that her brother Julien was still alive, albeit with a certain mental ailment that could be cured. If he lost his sister next, he might truly spiral into irredeemable madness.

After the banquet concludes, after the factory owners provide their "compensation," and after I settle all our debts, I'll take Julien and leave the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique. We'll find another place to live, far from the ensuing pain… Jenna repeated these words to herself, desperately trying to contain her emotions.

"Why is there another anomaly?" Hugues Artois questioned Imre, Valentine, and Antoine.

Imre offered a bitter smile and replied, "I witnessed that tree. It has appeared multiple times in Trier's history, but it has never been fully resolved."

Ever since joining the Purifier team in Trier, he had learned about the hidden dangers lurking beneath the ground that couldn't be entirely purified. The brownish-green tree was one of them.

He, his superiors, and his teammates couldn't fathom why Trier had been established atop such things in the first place.

Without giving Hugues Artois time to question their capabilities any further, Imre added,

"Now that the anomaly has been discovered, it won't be long before it's suppressed."

As a member of the elite Purifier team, he knew that Trier differed from other countries' capitals. Due to the perpetual underground dangers, both the former royal family and the current parliamentary government had agreed to the two Churches' secret dispatching of an angel each or placed Grade 0 Sealed Artifacts in Trier to prevent any mishaps.

Of course, during periods when the royal family and government held immense power, the Church's angels refrained from interfering. For example, during Emperor Roselle's reign.

Once the anomaly caused by the peculiar tree was exposed, it would swiftly face a devastating blow. Although it couldn't be completely eradicated, it would be kept under control for a considerable time.

…

After the swift and violent descent of the Tree of Shadow, the wilderness stabilized. Gabriel, Pavard Neeson, and the others remained suspended from the branches, their faces growing pale and blackened, as if drained of energy.

Lumian regained his balance and continued sprinting towards the nearby brownish-green tree, still engulfed in crimson flames.

At that moment, Susanna Mattise had regained a significant portion of her strength. Lumian's figure appeared in her eyes, awaiting his approach within the range of her current abilities.

Behind Lumian, a shadow detached itself from its owner and stealthily lunged at his back.

It was Charlotte Calvino, "acting" as a shadow!

Having not been the host of the ritual and being far from the treetop, she had not suffered the backlash or intense corruption, thus her strength had not waned. Seeing Lumian turn around, she quickly hid herself, and put to show her acting abilities, ready to execute a surprise attack

Suddenly, a gunshot pierced through the air in the distance.

The iron-black bullet was too distant and lacked precision. It grazed Charlotte's body, but it disrupted her plans.

Wearing a blouse, light-colored breeches, and red boots, Franca emerged at the edge of the wilderness, clutching a brass revolver. She cursed at Lumian's retreating form and shouted, "F*ck, don't you think I'm on your team?"

…

Noticing that the street had returned to its "normal" state, Hugues Artois made his way back to the center of the banquet hall, holding a glass of light-gold champagne. Standing before the gathering, he began his speech as usual.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to have you join us for this condolence banquet. Please join me in a moment of silence to honor those who have tragically departed…

"As you can see, yet another accident has occurred in the market district. We cannot continue like this. We must establish a more efficient and adaptable system to handle such situations.

"I understand that many of you harbor anger and fear in light of the recent accident. Your loved ones may have lost their lives, sustained severe injuries, or perhaps experienced agitation, mental breakdowns, and madness as a result of this…"

Jenna's head shot up upon hearing these words, her gaze fixed on Hugues Artois once more.

He had just mentioned "agitation, mental breakdowns, and madness" in such specific detail.

Under normal circumstances, such elaboration would not be necessary. A simple reference to insanity would suffice.

Did Hugues Artois know that someone would suffer a mental breakdown due to the chemical plant explosion and go mad? And was he deliberately mentioning it in his speech, as if a criminal returning to the crime scene, reveling in his sinister handiwork? An absurd mix of hatred and fear consumed Jenna's heart.

If her suspicions were correct, Julien's mental breakdown might have been influenced by the heretics!

Could he be cured? Could he be saved?

If I don't sever the source, even if I leave the market district with Julien, there might still be hidden dangers and lingering problems in the future! The feeling of desperation overwhelmed Jenna, as if she were trapped in an inescapable darkness.

Her pupils dilated, reflecting Hugues Artois's figure with a chilling clarity.

Imre, Valentine, and Antoine's expressions darkened, their gazes falling, as they heard Hugues Artois's implicit accusations against the two Churches.

…

The alternate space that accompanied the Tree of Shadow lay in ruins. Some areas were coated with pitch-black mucus, while others bore gaping holes, as if swallowed by an endless void.

Suddenly, a glimmer of light emerged from the shrunken door of starlight.

It grew brighter and brighter, akin to a transformed sun, illuminating every nook and cranny with an eerie clarity, banishing all shadows.

A female figure draped in a white robe adorned with golden threads emerged from the radiant source. She appeared to be crafted from pure light, translucent and ethereal. With emerald green eyes and flowing blond hair, she exuded beauty and a divine aura.

The guardian angel of Trier, Saint Viève.

…

Amidst the applause, Hugues Artois, having concluded his speech, mingled with the families of the victims, champagne glass in hand. He displayed enthusiasm,

friendliness, and a trustworthy demeanor.

Jenna closed her eyes and wandered towards the long table dressed in a white tablecloth. She picked up a plate and placed some food on it, then grabbed a long silver fork and began to eat.

As she ate, she slowly approached Hugues Artois in a daze.

Drawing near, just two meters away, she assumed a stance that suggested a conversation with Monsieur Member of Parliament.

Surrounded by his team and guarded by official Beyonders, Hugues Artois noticed Jenna. He smiled warmly, anticipating her approach.

Jenna passed by Secretary Rh?ne and positioned herself a step away from Hugues Artois.

Before their conversation could commence, the ground trembled once more, accompanied by a resounding rumble. Rue Anarchie and Rue des Blouses Blanches seemed to brighten significantly.

Cassandra, Hugues Artois, and the others turned their bodies instinctively, gazing out of the window, their concern evident.

Witnessing this, Jenna closed her eyes once more. Then, she took a step forward, raising the silver fork in her hand towards Hugues Artois!

All the emotions suppressed within her heart erupted.

You wretched politician, the bringer of disaster and darkness to the market district!

You heretic, your conscience devoured by a dog!

You are the bastard responsible for my mother’s death and my brother’s descent into madness!

Perish now!

Without your demise, the suffering in the market district shall never cease. Darkness shall engulf this place, preventing the dawn from breaking.

Indeed, with heretics surrounding you and the protection of official Beyonders, anyone attempting to confront you would meet their demise here, dissuaded by the risk.

But what if an assassin has no intention of leaving alive?

Jenna channeled all her hatred, outrage, and pain into the long-handled silver fork in her grasp. She unleashed an Assassin’s Mighty Blow, aiming for Hugues Artois’s exposed right eye as he turned his body.

In that moment, she glimpsed the surprise, confusion, and fear etched upon his face. She witnessed Hugues Artois frantically glancing towards Cassandra, pleading for assistance.

Cassandra's line of sight was obstructed by Purifier Imre, who had subtly stepped diagonally, leaving her unaware of the imminent danger.

With a squelching sound, the long-handled silver fork in Jenna's right hand plunged deep into Hugues Artois's eye socket, piercing into his brain.

Hugues Artois's expression froze. The fear, confusion, and terror remained etched on his visage. Time did not permit much change, only revealing a profound sense of despair.

Jenna watched as crimson blood gushed forth, and Hugues Artois's countenance gradually crumbled under the lights. Surrounding her, red sparks erupted, whether from firearms or supernatural abilities. She closed her eyes with a serene smile, surrendering to her fate.

Mother, I see the light.

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Chapter 259 - 259 Awe

259 Awe

Hugues Artois's initial reaction was one of surprise and confusion as he beheld the glimmering silver light emanating from the long-handled fork, thrusting menacingly towards him.

He found it hard to fathom that someone would attempt to assassinate him, a well-protected member of parliament, under these circumstances.

The assassin didn't appear particularly formidable.

Despite being a retired veteran, he had left military service five years ago to pursue a career in politics. His combat skills were no longer honed. With the adversary a mere step apart, evading the attack effectively seemed impossible.

Disregarding him, even a Sequence 9 or even a Sequence 8 Beyonder would likely struggle to dodge a Mighty Blow from an Assassin, especially one who had stealthily approached them. It all depended on whether their abilities could help them avoid vital areas or reduce the damage, thus preventing instant death.

Naturally, some Sequence 8 or 9 Beyonders possessed the ability to sense danger or hostility ahead of time, thwarting the approach and attack of Assassins.

In an instant, Hugues Artois cast his gaze upon the red-haired Cassandra, the three official Beyonders, and his subordinates Rh?ne, Margaret, and Boduva, feeling intense fear grip him.

However, what met his eyes was Cassandra's red hair—her body and line of sight obscured by the mixed-blood Imre—as well as the calm and indifferent gazes of the official Beyonders, Imre and Antoine. Valentine had reacted immediately but restrained himself, and Rh?ne, Margaret, and Boduva, though eager to use their Beyonder powers to save him, dared not expose their boons obtained from the evil gods.

At that moment, Hugues Artois was overwhelmed by a profound sense of despair.

You all, save me!

Save me!

With a squelching sound, the long-handled silver fork plunged mercilessly into Hugues Artois's right eye, propelled with all the force Jenna could muster. It pierced through the eye socket, penetrating the brain, with only a small portion of

the handle protruding outside.

Hugues Artois's thoughts became hazy.

He yearned to reach out and grasp something, but his arm wouldn't even rise.

I haven't become president… I haven't witnessed the arrival of great existences… I haven't received the boon of godhood… I cannot die like this… Slain by a feeble Assassin… I-I don't wish to perish… A barrage of thoughts flashed through Hugues Artois's mind as gunshots resounded in his ears.

His body slumped to the ground, and darkness enveloped his vision once more.

Thud. Hugues Artois, member of parliament for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, collapsed onto the ground, his heart ceasing to beat.

Jenna, her eyes shut and a smile adorning her face, was struck by bullets fired by nearby Bureau 7 agents.

One bullet struck her shoulder, and another pierced her ribs from the opposite side.

The pain contorted her expression instinctively. Her body involuntarily recoiled, as if she wished to curl up into a protective ball.

She opened her eyes and beheld Rh?ne and the other devotees of the evil gods glaring at her with hatred and an unnatural panic, yet refraining from attacking.

In the next instant, a golden revolver, its chamber loaded, pressed against Jenna's head. Imre surveyed the room and declared, "I have already subdued the assassin. Verify if Monsieur Member of Parliament can be saved and maintain order. No one should leave for the time being."

He made it clear that he intended to escort Jenna back to église Saint-Robert or inquire on the spot about the motive behind the assassination and the mastermind, preventing Cassandra and the others from venting their rage.

…

As the Tree of Shadow descended, the various streets reverted to their original state, yet they remained engulfed in wilderness.

Lumian perceived that Susanna Mattise could no longer stir his desires from a distance as she did before. So, he turned around, intending to confront Charlotte first.

The crimson flames enveloping his body burned with intensity, scorching his garments and searing his skin and flesh to varying degrees, inflicting constant pain.

This torment stimulated his mind, allowing him to maintain a certain level of clarity. He could also rely on the endurance bestowed by the Alms Monk boon to

sustain his thoughts and actions, instead of merely focusing on enduring the agony.

Even for Pyromaniacs, such incineration posed a threat. Moreover, as time passed, the damage would worsen, eventually endangering their lives.

Of course, long before that point, Lumian's spirituality would likely crumble. He could only allow the flames to extinguish on their own.

Were it not for the Alms Monk boon and the internal struggle within the Tree of Shadow, his spirituality would have been strained by the self-immolation.

Upon seeing Lumian turn and observe "Red Boots" Franca dashing toward her with a brass classic revolver, sliding across a layer of frost formed beneath her feet, Charlotte abandoned her plans for a surprise attack. Instead, she readied herself to return to the Tree of Shadow, where she could exploit the environment and enhance her abilities to confront the enemy.

Her body instantaneously grew pliable, as though secreting a slimy substance.

She "acted" as a serpent-like creature, utilizing the intertwining vines and branches to swiftly retreat toward the brownish-green tree.

At that moment, Charlotte's body froze.

It was akin to facing a dragon head-on, confronting a predator at the apex of the biological hierarchy. She couldn't help but tremble with fear and overwhelming panic.

She circled her immediate vicinity and ran haphazardly, as if fleeing from an unseen adversary.

Not far from her, Anthony Reid, the information broker, emerged from behind an iron-black gas street lamp post, suspended by the vines and branches of the Auberge du Coq Doré.

At some point, his dark brown eyes had transformed into a pale golden hue, adopting a vertical orientation.

He was a Psychiatrist, a Sequence 7 Psychiatrist of the Spectator pathway.

He had just employed Awe!

In ancient times, it was referred to as Dragon Might!

The brownish-green vines and branches surrounding Anthony Reid, manipulated by Susanna rather than the Tree of Shadow, cowered and retreated from him.

Observing Charlotte's descent into madness and confusion, rendering her unable to evade Lumian's attacks, Susanna, who desperately absorbed vitality, narrowed her eyes and cursed, unable to conceal her deep-seated hatred.

“You shall all perish. Today, you shall all meet your demise!”

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! On the Tree of Shadow, new tree trunks distinct from the main body shot forth like javelins, aimed at impaling Lumian in the midst of the wilderness.

Apart from utilizing the abilities of the Fallen Tree Spirit, Susanna Mattise had not yet regained sufficient strength to affect targets dozens or even nearly a hundred meters away.

Lumian had foreseen this. With a roll, he positioned himself within the area where Charlotte aimlessly fled.

Thud! Thud! Thud! The tree trunk javelins impaled the ground nearby, pounding the wilderness like hammers.

Lumian rose to his feet, engulfed in crimson flames. He extended his arms slightly and let out a boisterous laugh.

“Bring it on, kill me!”

If Susanna were to blanket the area with relentless assaults once again, he could still find a way to evade them. However, Charlotte, lost in her state of confusion, would undoubtedly meet her demise!

As he bellowed, half-illusory crimson Fire Ravens materialized behind Lumian. They circled and traced multiple trajectories, fixating their sights on Charlotte Calvino.

The branches and vines on the ground surged wildly, swiftly ensnaring Charlotte, shielding her from harm.

A series of thunderous sounds resounded as the crimson Fire Ravens descended upon Charlotte, shattering tree branches and igniting vines, systematically stripping away layer after layer of the Actor’s outer shell.

Bang!

Franca, who had closed the distance, stepped in and extended her right hand, firmly squeezing the trigger.

An iron-black bullet flew from the classic brass revolver and struck Charlotte’s head with precision, piercing through the gap created by the Fire Ravens.

The enchanting, pure, and delicate visage instantly shattered, with red and white fluids splattering forth from her eyes, nose, and mouth.

With only its severed head remaining, the lifeless body stumbled a few steps in confusion before finally collapsing to the ground.

“Go to hell!” Susanna roared.

With that cry, brown branches, green vines, thick limbs, and pale-colored blossoms surged forth in a multitude of forms, converging upon Lumian, Franca, and Anthony.

Despite the nightmarish scene unfolding before them, Lumian sensed no immediate peril.

Until Susanna Mattise regained a certain level of strength, an attack that consumed a significant amount of spirituality posed no true threat.

Lumian charged forward once more, carrying the crimson flames that devoured his flesh, venturing deeper into the primordial forest-like setting.

Vines ignited, flowers turned to ash, branches charred, yet none impeded the enemy’s advance toward the Tree of Shadow.

Suddenly, the objects recoiled, drawing the suspended human captives back into the embrace of the Tree of Shadow.

Susanna had thought it through. There was no need to squander energy merely to vent her rage. It was wiser to await the approach of the three prey, luring them into the range where desire could take hold, before employing her most formidable abilities to deal with them.

She could not accept her current weakness. That was one of the reasons why she refrained from invoking the incantation to seek assistance initially.

Before dragging the offering into the Tree of Shadow, the Son of God dared not reveal Himself in Trier. In the future, Susanna possessed a measure of confidence and needed to push the offering to a certain extent, securing the protection of the ritual. Only then could she utilize her fusion with the Tree of Shadow to confront the Son of God.

The Son of God was astonishingly deranged. He would never restrain the corruption He might inflict upon His subordinates.

As for Lady Moon, she had merely pledged to intercept potential saboteurs temporarily. Susanna dared not permit devotees of other deities to enter the Tree of Shadow.

Thud, thud, thud. Lumian raced through the abruptly vacated wilderness and dilapidated streets, sprinting toward the brownish-green tree. Franca and Anthony each selected their respective angles of attack and followed suit from different directions.

The fortunate vendors, pedestrians, and tenants who had yet to be ensnared by the branches and vines seized the opportunity to flee the wilderness, making their way towards the outskirts.

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Chapter 260 - 260 Cracking

260 Cracking

It didn't take long for Lumian, Franca, and Anthony to approach the Tree of Shadow, stepping within the effective range of Susanna's powers.

One of them had run out of Mysticism Smelling Salts and was consumed by crimson flames. His skin grew numb, but his flesh still burned with pain. Another moved gracefully, constantly shifting positions. Every now and then, she would inhale the scent of the metal canister in her hand and let out a sneeze. The third employed the Psychiatrist's Placate ability to pacify his emotions and desires.

In the ethereal crown of the tree, Susanna Mattise, positioned only four to five meters above the ground, grunted. Franca, dressed in a blouse and light-colored trousers, saw her reflection in Susanna's eyes.

Suddenly, intense fear gripped Franca.

Yet, this fear didn't arise from the outside world or grow abnormally intense. Rather, it originated from her understanding of the current situation and her desire to survive.

Susanna Mattise, fused with the peculiar tree, couldn't be treated as a mere Sequence 5. She ought to be regarded as a weakened Sequence 4, one lacking an incomplete Mythical Creature form!

Franca believed that Susanna Mattise would swiftly dispatch her, Lumian, and the information broker.

Before saving anyone, she had to save herself!

Franca halted, her yearning for life impossible to suppress.

She struggled, torn between the urge to flee and the nagging feeling that she shouldn't abandon her teammates.

Susanna Mattise's emerald eyes shifted toward Anthony Reid.

The information broker, his emotions and desires now stabilized, shuddered suddenly, an all-too-familiar fear surging from the depths of his heart.

A Spectator afflicted by severe mental deficiencies is all too easy to deal with… Anthony Reid fully comprehended his predicament, yet he lacked the power to resist.

A helpless sigh escaped his lips. When his Placate failed, he trembled and retreated to a corner, succumbing to overwhelming fear.

Swiftly, Susanna Mattise incapacitated Lumian's two companions, leaving them unable to offer aid for the moment.

Then, she directed her gaze at Lumian, who stood less than ten meters away from the Tree of Shadow.

As an evil spirit, Susanna possessed boundless extremism and persistence. She still sought to capture this sacrifice.

Despite the ritual causing a great uproar, prompting numerous saints and even angels to rush and intervene, making its success unlikely, the Tree of Shadow could not be destroyed. It wouldn't even suffer significant harm. Unless the Eternal Blazing Sun or the God of Steam and Machinery were willing to bury the millions of people residing in Trier and expose even graver underlying problems underground, there would always be another opportunity, even if the present one failed.

As long as Lumian remained within her grasp, the sacrificial offering that perfectly sealed an angel, it wouldn't take long for Susanna to attempt the ritual once more!

Hence, the malevolent spirit, Susanna Mattise, desired to capture Lumian alive.

In an instant, Lumian's pace slowed, his mind consumed by the same thoughts.

I mustn't die. I mustn't die. If I perish, Aurore will have no hope of revival…

I must survive and uncover the truth behind the Cordu disaster. I must understand why Aurore believes in Inevitability…

These people have no connection to me. What does it matter if they die? Don't countless lives perish every day in this world? Can I even prevent that?

"…"

Lumian's pace grew sluggish, his expression contorting in agony.

The fiery crimson flames that engulfed him continued to burn, inflicting pain while also sharpening his senses.

But the more aware he became, the stronger his desire to survive.

This time, Susanna's influence over his desires had not faltered.

The Fallen Tree Spirit summoned an array of vines, branches, and tree trunks from the Tree of Shadow, ensnaring Lumian within a small circular perimeter of less than ten meters. The once open space transformed into a dense, ancient forest

teeming with vegetation.

Damp, pale-hued flowers sprouted from the roots, vines, and branches, releasing odorless anesthetic gases that threatened to lull the surroundings into a deep slumber.

In that moment, Lumian's yearning for life aligned with his other thoughts.

To escape this dire predicament and survive, he had to press forward and defeat Susanna Mattise!

Lumian surged forward once more, gathering semi-illusory crimson flames behind him, spiraling them toward Susanna Mattise, who hovered merely four meters above the ground.

He didn't expect this assault to harm the Fallen Tree Spirit. After all, Susanna Mattise had merged with the Tree of Shadow, granting her formidable defenses and vitality. Moreover, she wasn't a mindless foe who couldn't dodge attacks or employ superpowers to safeguard herself.

Lumian's objective was to momentarily disrupt Susanna Mattise's focus and impede her from inciting another desire immediately.

This time, the crimson Fire Ravens managed to breach the ethereal barrier. They passed through the weakened defenses and hurtled toward Susanna Mattise.

Layers of brownish-green vines and branches encased Susanna Mattise, enveloping her in a wooden sphere, her pair of green eyes the only feature visible.

Amidst the rumbling, the plant-like encasement exploded, replaced swiftly by fresh growth.

Meanwhile, less than ten meters slipped away in the blink of an eye for Lumian.

Vast amounts of slumberous gas corroded his body, but they were swiftly consumed and evaporated by the searing crimson flames. The charred scent of his flesh neutralized the remaining fumes, leaving only a small portion to infiltrate Lumian's nostrils.

His thoughts slowed, his head spun, yet his movements remained unaffected for the time being.

Harnessing his momentum, Lumian alternated between his left and right feet, launching a forceful kick against the brownish-green trunk. He propelled himself forward by a couple of meters before leaping high into the air, his gaze fixed upon Susanna Mattise.

Behind him, a colossal fireball gradually took shape. His eyes reflected the wooden sphere and Susanna Mattise's emerald-green gaze.

It seemed as though he intended to hurtle himself at the treetop, obliterating the encasing of plants with the mighty fireball.

This particular stance bore an evident element of showmanship. Lumian's desire to perform had been subtly provoked by Susanna Mattise, even if his ceaseless pain could only be slightly suppressed.

Susanna Mattise grinned, allowing sharp brownish-green tree trunks to emerge from the surface of the encasement like a porcupine baring its spikes, ready to impale any unsuspecting prey.

Once Lumian sustained grave injuries, the vines and branches forming the sphere would unfurl, taking complete control of their captive.

As the massive fireball solidified, Lumian began his descent.

Yet, instead of lunging at Susanna Mattise, he regarded her with an air of superiority, eye to eye.

Still, he refrained from attacking. He continued his descent. Susanna Mattise wore a puzzled expression, perplexed by his failure to walk into her trap.

Only when Lumian touched down below the treetop did he make his next move.

The massive, incomplete fireball detonated, propelling him toward the trunk of the Tree of Shadow like a cannonball.

In his left hand, he wielded Fallen Mercury, now adorned with cracks.

Right from the start, Lumian hadn't set his sights on Susanna Mattise, who possessed freedom of movement and the advantages of being a Sequence 5. It would be highly risky, with little chance of success and much danger involved.

His sole objective was to strike the Tree of Shadow with Fallen Mercury, a single strike!

Without the enhancement of Termiboros, Fallen Mercury alone wouldn't be enough to alter the fate of the brownish-green tree. However, Lumian was confident that Susanna Mattise had fused to some extent with the Tree of Shadow. As the name "Fallen Tree Spirit" implied, a tree was necessary to embody a tree spirit.

This understanding derived not only from Lumian's observations but also from Franca's speculations and Susanna Mattise's own admissions and actions.

In essence, when Fallen Mercury pierced the Tree of Shadow, there was a strong possibility that it would alter the fate of Susanna Mattise, who had merged with it, rather than the fate of the Tree of Shadow itself!

Lumian's actions were intended to deceive Susanna Mattise into overconfidence, ensuring she wouldn't impede his approach to the Tree of Shadow or hinder him from gathering a fireball for propulsion.

And Susanna Mattise's manipulation of his desire to perform only fueled Lumian's confidence further.

Though acting was a waste of time and could potentially lead to missed opportunities, it also served as a cover for one's true intentions!

With a loud crash, Lumian and Fallen Mercury collided with the brownish-green trunk. Ribs cracked, wrist snapped, his entire body battered by the explosion and impact. But he managed to drive the pewter-black dirk through the outer bark and into the second layer.

As expected, Lumian didn't "see" the torrent of historical scenes. Instead, he sensed the illusionary river, shimmering with a mercury hue, that belonged to Susanna Mattise.

In the next instant, his desire was manipulated once again, and a barrage of javelins rained down from the ethereal tree crown.

Releasing his hold on the pewter-black dirk, Lumian entrusted the rest to Fallen Mercury.

He plummeted to the ground, using the pain to reclaim consciousness. With a swift roll, he evaded the tree javelins that impaled the earth.

When Susanna Mattise realized Lumian's true intent, she felt vexed, angry, and somewhat fearful.

The previous use of the pewter-black dirk had left a deep impression on her.

However, she wasn't overly concerned for her safety. With her connection to the Tree of Shadow, it would be arduous for her to be slain, even if she encountered a saint. Her worry lay in the possibility of severe injury, which would thwart her chance of capturing her prey once more.

At that moment, Fallen Mercury shattered into pewter-black fragments, silently descending to the ground.

Long worn and weakened, it could no longer endure.

However, its destruction also brought an end to the fate exchange, which should have taken several minutes to complete. It didn't stir any fate within Susanna Mattise. It merely bestowed upon her the fate stored within the blade.

Normally, this would be impossible as Fallen Mercury had to adhere to corresponding rules. But now, shattered and fragmented, it couldn't care less.

Susanna Mattise froze, purple flames erupting from her body.

Fallen Mercury had bestowed upon her the fate of the Tree of Shadow's root being consumed by an unseen underground fire. As a tree trunk akin to the Tree of Shadow, she couldn't escape this fate!

In a mere second, the purple flames vanished, leaving Susanna Mattise reduced to ashes, her eyes filled with disbelief and astonishment.

A tree trunk erupted in flames, cracking and collapsing.

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Chapter 261 - 261 Escape

261 Escape

The branches and vines pursuing Lumian swiftly withdrew, as if responding to an unseen command. A javelin-like tree trunk crashed down, causing the rest to vanish into thin air.

Gasping for breath, Lumian cast his gaze upward as he sprinted onward.

At that moment, his eyes fell upon the incinerated form of Susanna Mattise, consumed by the vegetative sphere that had enveloped her. Not far off, he witnessed an unfamiliar tree trunk snap and succumb to fiery destruction.

She's dead! Relief flooded Lumian's being. She's dead! The burden of his struggle lifted, and he crumpled to the ground, no longer able to hold on.

The crimson flames that had enveloped him abruptly extinguished, unveiling his charred and disfigured body.

With great effort, Lumian struggled to prop himself up, his back pressed against the vine- and branch-adorned wall of the Auberge du Coq Doré. He resembled a forsaken vagabond, abandoned by the world, a hint of derision in his voice as he observed the Tree of Shadow sinking deeper and deeper into the earth.

Moreover, he witnessed the vines and branches retracting into the main trunk, the once-suspended individuals released from their tethers and descending to the ground from varying heights.

Among the initial group of victims, whose essence had been drained, three to four individuals remained suspended nearly three meters above the ground. Already weakened, most of their remaining vitality escaped as they suffered the harsh impact, causing them to lose consciousness on the spot. Perhaps there was still hope for their salvation, or perhaps they were beyond rescue.

The hundreds who had been suspended but had not yet lost a significant portion of their essence sustained various injuries from the fall. Though their lives were not immediately endangered, they hurriedly rose to their feet, driven to escape to the fringes of the wilderness.

Gabriel's complexion turned pale, bruises marring his hands and feet. Rather than fleeing, his initial instinct led him to stoop and collect the scattered Lightseeker script from the ground. The eloping couple, entwined together in their suspension, exchanged curses for being a hindrance, but they supported one another as they limped forward, their legs injured from the fall. They joined the fleeing throng,

vanishing into the distance. Pavard Neeson, the proprietor of the clandestine underground bar, suffered relatively minor injuries. Grasping the freshly drawn draft, he raced ahead…

Charred and weary, Lumian settled on the street, leaning against the Auberge du Coq Doré, situated perilously close to the Tree of Shadow. Tilting his head back against the wall, he wore a faint smile while observing the energetic exodus of peddlers, passersby, and inhabitants of modest abodes as they fled towards the outskirts of the wilderness.

…

Within the confines of the Tree of Shadow, Lady Moon beheld a tumultuous clash unfolding, with numerous angels and saints joining the fray. Her faction faced mounting pressure due to reinforcements from the two Churches and Bureau 8. An overwhelming sense of retreat washed over her.

Should this continue, the two Churches might resort to drastic measures, beseeching divine intervention! Lady Moon swiftly resolved.

Deprived of several abilities and ensnared by various Prohibitions, she pressed against the bulge in her abdomen and parted her lips.

An ear-piercing Shriek erupted within this alternate realm, causing the nearly two-meter-tall Tree of Shadow before her to undergo an instantaneous metamorphosis.

Upon the branches and mist-shrouded bark, which depicted scenes from the past, figures born from diverse desires, now lifeless, sprang back to existence, save for Emperor Roselle.

Many were demigods, emerging from their respective “histories” with vacant, icy expressions and an aura of chilling darkness.

Resurrection!

Empowered by the Divine Fetus nestled within her womb and the unique essence of the Tree of Shadow, Lady Moon temporarily revived the accumulated desires from over a millennium in their original corporeal forms.

Though the revival would be short-lived, and the resurrected beings notably weaker than before, the sudden influx of demigods into the battle within mere seconds could profoundly impact the unfolding chaos.

It was precisely due to the timely aid of the Divine Fetus that Lady Moon dared to linger behind, partaking in this tumultuous clash. Without it, having only agreed to provide cover and hindrance to those from the Bliss Society, she would have already sought refuge elsewhere.

In eerie silence, the resurrected phantoms disintegrated beneath the scorching sunlight. Lady Moon seized the opportune moment to summon Paramita, which had not yet fallen into complete disarray, merging with it and vanishing from

sight.

…

On Avenue du Marché, inside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the parliament member's office.

Imre, the mixed-blood individual, refrained from immediately questioning Jenna, an assassin. Instead, he directed two agents from Bureau 7 to tend to Jenna's wound, staunching the profuse bleeding and applying bandages. He conveyed the impression that allowing the culprit to succumb to her injuries would hinder their ability to gather crucial clues. Valentine, Antoine, and the other agents observed and interrogated the remaining participants of the banquet, including Cassandra and Rh?ne, who belonged to Greg Artois's team.

Rumble!

Once again, the ground beneath their feet trembled. Those near the windows caught glimpses of Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches, intermittently flickering with light. Approaching them were clergymen garbed in white robes embellished with golden threads, wielding various contraptions.

This development disrupted the interrogation of Imre, Valentine, and the others. After a while, Angoulême de Fran?ois strode into the banquet hall, clad in a coat adorned with golden buttons, accompanied by a grayish-white humanoid mechanical creation. Several additional team members and a contingent of police officers followed suit.

Upon hearing Imre's report, Angoulême cast a glance at Jenna and instructed Travis Everett, "Bring all the attendees of the banquet to headquarters for separate interrogations.

"Leave the assassin here. We shall handle her questioning. Hmm… also keep the members of Monsieur Member of Parliament's team. There are matters we must clarify."

Everett raised no objections. The organization's constables escorted the anxious onlookers away from the khaki-colored building housing the member of parliament's office.

As the hall emptied, Angoulême turned to the two Bureau 7 agents standing beside Jenna and instructed them, "Escort the assassin to the lounge. We must ensure she does not overhear our conversation and withhold any truths."

With Jenna escorted to the lounge facing the back alley, Angoulême approached Cassandra, Rh?ne, and the others, speaking in a deep voice, "Hi there, there is information we must acquire."

A faint smile adorned his face.

“Indeed, Monsieur Member of Parliament has met his demise. According to the law, his position is immediately vacated.

“In other words, you are no longer part of Monsieur Member of Parliament’s team. The immunity you once enjoyed is no more.

“So, before we engage in our discussion, let us proceed with some notarizations.”

Upon hearing Angoulême’s words, Cassandra and the others’ expressions underwent a marked change.

Meanwhile, in the lounge, Jenna, who had calmed herself after assassinating Hugues Artois, heard a tumultuous commotion emanating from the hall.

One of the armed agents from Bureau 7, tasked with keeping watch, hastened to the door to investigate.

Seizing the opportunity, Jenna’s heart skipped a beat as a plan materialized in her mind.

Her countenance transformed, and she gazed past her remaining guard with a mix of surprise and fear.

Though extensively trained, the agent possessed an understanding beyond that of ordinary individuals. Today, an abnormal occurrence had unfolded on Rue Anarchie, culminating in the assassination of Monsieur Member of Parliament. Reports indicated a battle involving supernatural forces transpiring within the hall. It was only natural for him to worry about potential repercussions reaching the lounge and an unseen threat lurking behind him.

Subconsciously, he entertained the notion of turning around, but halfway through the motion, caution compelled him to remain vigilant.

Yet, this proved to be the only opening Jenna needed.

Already restrained by handcuffs, she balled her fists and struck the agent’s shoulder and neck with force, sending him sprawling to the ground. His revolver slipped from his grasp.

Before the agent near the door could react, Jenna positioned her hands on the windowsill, propelling herself upward. She crashed through the glass and descended into the back alley with the grace of a feather.

Suppressing the pain from her gunshot wound, she sought refuge in the shadows of a nearby corner and swiftly departed the khaki-colored building.

…

Lady Moon weaved through different directions, employing various abilities until she finally emerged from Paramita.

At that moment, she found herself in Quartier éraste, northwest of Trier. Before her stood a magnificent building adorned with golden steeples.

Lady Moon cautiously surveyed her surroundings and discreetly let out a sigh of relief.

Had the Tree of Shadow's deeper intrusion into the Fourth Epoch's Trier served the Great Mother's interests, she wouldn't have joined the Bliss Society's mission. She had no desire to reveal herself. It was well-known that those who controlled desires often fell prey to their own desires. The chances of failure were not insignificant.

Without delay, Lady Moon slipped into the beige building from its side entrance.

A few hundred meters away, a golden retriever sat silently beside a woman dressed in green.

They observed Lady Moon's every move and the grand structure with its numerous steeples, their expressions solemn.

It was the Sacred Heart Cloister of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.

…

In the wilderness where Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and the buildings on Rue des Blouses Blanches crumbled, Lumian witnessed the Tree of Shadow on the brink of sinking into the ground. He couldn't help but taunt Termiboros.

"Well, I'm not that unlucky after all. I've actually succeeded."

Hardly had the words left his lips when Franca, who had regained her senses, rushed over and hissed, "Are you trying to play the role of a charred corpse?"

As she spoke, she retrieved the Healing Agent she had obtained from the Poison Spur Mob, intending to offer Lumian half a canister.

Lumian's injuries weren't as severe as they seemed. Fatal burns for most Low-Sequence Beyonders would require no more than a month or two for Pyromaniacs to recover from. As for fractures, explosions, and impacts, none of them could claim the life of a Hunter immediately. Enduring until tomorrow would naturally bring about recovery.

Considering the potential pursuit of official Beyonders after the wilderness completely vanished, Lumian didn't tempt fate and consumed half a vial.

Soon, he felt his body rapidly regenerating.

At this moment, the wilderness teetered on the edge of collapse. The streets had returned to their original positions, and many people had already rushed in.

Franca surveyed her surroundings and spoke swiftly, “Can you still move? We must leave this place swiftly.”

“Alright.” Lumian rose to his feet.

He took a couple of steps to the side, intending to retrieve the charred tree trunk that had been part of the Tree of Shadow before departing.

Just as Lumian grasped the trunk, something caught his peripheral vision.

Within the depression left behind by the Tree of Shadow’s submersion, a hazy and translucent creature darted past.

Lumian’s pupils dilated, struggling to believe what he had witnessed. He yearned for a clearer view.

It was a diaphanous, indistinct figure resembling a lizard!

It bore an uncanny resemblance to the elf he had encountered in his dream!

It was the very creature that had emerged from Aurore’s mouth!

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Chapter 262 - 262 Review

262 Review

Lumian had always held the belief that the lizard-like elf he saw was merely a figment of his dreaming mind. Symbols and metaphors held a deeper significance than the tangible reality.

Yet now, before his very eyes, the diaphanous and elusive lizard-like creature revealed itself in all its existence!

It was undeniably real!

Moreover, it had appeared in Paramita, emerging from the deep chasm left by the Tree of Shadow—a most peculiar event involving formidable powers!

Could it be that the lizard crawling out of Aurore's mouth was not a fabrication? What did it symbolize, and what were its intentions? Lumian's brow furrowed as he contorted his expression, experiencing a mix of pain, shock, confusion, and withdrawal.

This agitation stirred something within Lumian, making him feel that he could regain some of his memories and determine their authenticity. Yet, this time, the scenes didn't flicker through his mind as they did during psychiatric treatments or after hearing Madame Pualis's words. The dream still lingered in his memory.

In that moment, Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

"Do you truly believe that I am responsible for all the anomalies and misfortunes surrounding you?

"Do you think you can escape Susanna Mattise, who is nearly a demigod with a backup plan, by relying solely on the efforts of the sealed me and a Sequence 7 Beyonder like yourself?

"Do you believe that Susanna Mattise's failure is solely due to her being an evil spirit, extremism, impatience, and lack of preparation before the ritual? Is there no other underlying reason?"

These words overlapped and resounded in Lumian's mind, allowing him to grasp their meaning within a short span of time.

Lumian was taken aback, feeling as if he had been plunged into an icy lake, experiencing the transition from early summer to winter.

He blurted out, “Then what is it?”

Termiboros remained silent, as if sensing and comprehending something.

In an instant, Lumian’s joy surged. He felt the heavy burden on his shoulders dissipate significantly.

Does this mean that Aurore truly fell under the control of that peculiar lizard-like creature?

Was that why she remained oblivious to any abnormality when awake, seeking assistance from the outside world alongside me?

No, perhaps she sensed that something was amiss. The correct interpretation of the letter’s order should be: “We are getting weirder. The people around us need help as soon as possible!”

Franca nudged Lumian.

“Why are you lost in thought? Hurry, let us leave this place swiftly. The official Beyonders and clergymen have arrived!”

Lumian shook off his daze and dashed with Franca to the far end of Rue Anarchie, his singed clothes clinging to his body, along with the tree trunk originating from the Tree of Shadow—not Susanna’s later creation.

During this process, two revelations suddenly dawned upon him.

As an angel of Inevitability, Termiboros also displayed an astute understanding of various matters. It is inconceivable for Him to remain oblivious to Susanna Mattise’s offering Him as a sacrifice to the Mother Tree of Desire with me as the primary vessel without unsealing the seal. He is no novice to the mystical world like me!

Therefore, He never anticipated the outcome of Susanna Mattise breaking the seal from the very beginning. He made those claims purely as a bluff, coercing me to seek His aid and agree to certain unequal terms, creating an opportunity for Him to truly escape.

What He didn’t foresee was my choice to deceive Susanna Mattise, compelling Him to provide me assistance based on the information she provided. No, He must have considered this possibility, but he had nothing to lose by attempting it. What if I had not devised a swift solution at that critical moment?

Dammit, His intentions are far too sinister! I could have fallen victim to His deception with the slightest carelessness!

Likewise, Susanna Mattise is no paragon of honesty.

Since she sought guidance from the Mother Tree of Desire and acknowledged the possibility of an angel being sealed within me, why wouldn't she contemplate the potential transmission of power through the seal? Subsequently, she prayed for power capable of withstanding the influence of Termiboros's leaked power, or even surpassing it. I failed to perceive it then and came dangerously close to corruption despite being distant.

Had I not escaped the Tree of Shadow in the nick of time, I would have succumbed to corruption.

Why didn't Susanna Mattise seek assistance right from the start? Could it be that corruption poses a threat to her as well?

Indeed, despite unforeseen circumstances during the Cordu ritual, the padre, as the host of the sacrificial ceremony, was shielded by the power of Inevitability. He did not transform into a monstrous entity or merge into the three-headed giant like the others and successfully escaped… Susanna Mattise also planned on relying on the protection of the ritual to resist corruption?

Hence, she bought time, awaiting the completion of the ritual's preparations!

She did not target and control me initially because she knew that pushing too hard would prompt Termiboros to intervene prematurely, introducing too many uncertainties.

Thus, she endeavored to create an illusion for me, fostering the belief that resistance and escape were within reach. Only when I broached the subject of the angel did she stall for time, stringing together a series of seemingly revealing words. She concealed her true trump card, biding her time for me to make the wrong choice with Termiboros's aid and fall into her prearranged trap.

Although she did not anticipate the attack from the Montsouris ghost, had it not been for an external intervention exploiting the crack created by the ghost, I would have remained trapped within the Tree of Shadow's depths. Moreover, she was on the verge of officially activating the ritual and gaining protection.

Dammit! Beautiful Actors truly possess the knack for deceiving others!

As Lumian and Franca sprinted ahead, their surroundings suddenly transformed into a surreal spectacle. Vibrant layers of colors intertwined with indescribable, fantastical creatures.

His head spun, and his vision became hazy.

When his sight cleared, Rue Anarchie was nowhere in sight, and the vibrant palette had vanished.

Instead, he found himself standing on a verdant hillside, facing Madam Magician, adorned in an orange dress.

She's here too… Lumian glanced around but couldn't spot Franca.

As if sensing his unspoken question, Madam Magician smiled and spoke, "The Two of Cups departed with her Major Arcana card to attend to some matters."

"The Two of Cups?" Lumian was perplexed.

"That's Franca. She is one of us. Her code name is Two of Cups, just as you are the Seven of Wands," Madam Magician casually explained. "You have officially joined our ranks. Speak to the Two of Cups later and have her introduce our organization. I won't say much."

Not only is Franca a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but she is also part of the secret organization utilizing tarot card codenames? Lumian felt a mix of surprise and elation.

This meant that he and Franca were true comrades.

Madam Magician scrutinized Lumian's charred countenance and fragmented attire. From somewhere, she produced a simple brown suit tailored for a man and tossed it to him.

"Change into this later. While it's not particularly scandalous for Trieriens to roam the streets nude, one mustn't entirely succumb to the surroundings. You must maintain your true self. Only then can you resist the potion's corruption and minimize the risk of losing control."

Lumian caught the clothes, and Madam Magician pondered for a moment before speaking, "Tell me in detail what has transpired recently. Although I knew you would encounter followers of the evil gods and become entangled with them, I did not anticipate you getting embroiled in such weighty matters directly."

Lumian recounted the events, starting from his arrival in Trier to his use of the Summoning Dance to lure Susanna Mattise. He focused on the sacrificial ritual, Termiboros's involvement, and the enigmatic lizard-like creature.

As Madam Magician listened, her expression grew solemn. Once Lumian finished speaking, she nodded slightly and said, "This is highly abnormal. Both Termiboros and that elf are far from ordinary."

She gazed at Lumian, speaking in a direct manner, "It wasn't Termiboros who aided you in enhancing Fallen Mercury's abilities within the Tree of Shadow and allowed the Montsouris ghost to arrive early."

"Not Him?" Lumian had speculated the issues that Madam Magician might uncover, but he never expected her to address this matter so clearly.

If not Termiboros, then who else could it be?

Moreover, the subsequent changes only occurred after the compromise of the Inevitable angel.

“I don’t have the answers either.” Madam Magician shook her head slowly. “What I can affirm is that the seal of that great existence wouldn’t allow Termiboros to unleash such power. If that were possible, He would have long manipulated you to assist Him in breaking the seal.”

Observing Lumian’s perplexed expression, Madam Magician continued, “All Termiboros can do is influence your judgment and choices. After all, He is sealed within you, and your fates are intertwined to a certain extent.

“To put it simply, concerning Charlie’s situation, Termiboros couldn’t expedite Susanna Mattise’s recovery. He couldn’t dictate when or how she planned to find Charlie. He could merely utilize this situation to instill in you the intention of employing the Luck Transference Spell to alter Charlie’s fate and augment the corresponding likelihood.

“From this standpoint, do you believe He possesses the capability to enhance Fallen Mercury’s abilities and allow the timely arrival of the Montsouris ghost?

“However, it is plausible for Him to aid you in shouldering the burden of the past scenes within the Tree of Shadow.

“Hence, I have consistently advised you to seek my counsel beforehand on critical and perilous matters rather than making decisions on your own.”

Lumian’s heart surged like a tumultuous ocean.

He recollected the incident where Rentas took Charlie underground and realized that Madam Magician’s words held truth.

Charlie’s gruesome plight and destiny stemmed from two factors. Firstly, the threat posed by the Bliss Society through Rentas, and secondly, Lumian’s own choice at the crossroads of fate. Thus, once Rentas was slain by their hands, Charlie’s fortune merely improved marginally. Only when Lumian made the correct decision did everything revert to normalcy. There were no indications of Termiboros’s influence.

If He could sway Charlie’s path in the same manner He manipulated the Montsouris ghost, Lumian would have fallen victim long ago.

Moreover, why would Susanna Mattise entertain the idea of capturing me alive, knowing that I can receive indirect assistance from an angel after she departed from the Tree of Shadow and was in a weakened state, despite being aware of Termiboros’s limited influences?

Unless Susanna Mattise, who possesses a trace of godhood due to the Tree of Shadow, had already deduced that Termiboros was impotent in exerting influence and remained tightly sealed following the internal conflict within the Tree of

Shadow. There must be another origin to this quandary! And that origin did not depart alongside her! Dammit! I had presumed that even if my judgment faltered or the fate exchange prolonged, Termiboros would never allow Susanna Mattise to capture me alive, as it would render Him a sacrificial pawn. Little did I know, He lacked the capability entirely… Lumian postulated, obtaining a more rational explanation for the recent turn of events.

“What exactly happened?” he inquired, a tinge of anguish and anger coloring his tone.

Madam Magician pondered for a few seconds before responding, “Taking into account those misfortunes, I suspect that Termiboros has allies in the outside world. In other words, there may be a Beyonder lurking around you who possesses the ability to influence fate. He secretly accomplished tasks in accordance with the ideas transmitted by Termiboros, but he did so with subtlety to avoid exposure.”

A word suddenly flashed across Lumian’s mind: Sufferer!

In his dream, after entering the underground altar with Ryan’s team, they had become tainted by the aura of a Sufferer!

As for the owl and the other “him” within the Warlock’s tomb, prior to their unveiling, they always gave him the impression that they were the root of the problem and the mastermind behind it all.

Could these be symbolic as well?

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Chapter 263 - 263 Choice

263 Choice

Lumian had always believed that his dream self represented his darker side, a twisted persona born from the corruption of Inevitability.

But now, it seemed there was more to it.

There was no problem with his understanding of his own essence, but was he, along with the owl hidden in the Warlock's tomb, also serving as a symbol?

A representation of the puppet master behind the scenes, the true orchestrator of the lizard-like creature and the grand ritual in Cordu?

And now, he was lurking in the shadows, attempting to collaborate with Termiboros in order to break free from the seal.

However, Termiboros's attitude towards the lizard-like creature seemed to suggest otherwise…

Lumian fell silent for a few seconds before sharing his speculations in detail with Madam Magician.

The Magician listened attentively, pondering for a moment before speaking.

"I initially believed that by undergoing progressive psychiatric treatment and recalling forgotten events one by one, the truth of Cordu Village would become clear to you. It wouldn't be any different from what I already know."

"But hearing what you've just said, I suspect that some of the symbols and metaphors in your dreams hold deeper, hidden secrets."

"But regardless, those symbols and metaphors are projections from my actual experiences. It's impossible that I still can't decipher them after regaining my memories, right?" Lumian objected.

Madam Magician smiled and replied, "That might not be the case."

Seeing Lumian's confusion, she explained simply, "On the one hand, you may not have directly experienced those events, but your spirit and subconscious sensed danger and abnormalities, projecting them into your dreams with symbolic elements.

“On the other hand, Termiboros is sealed within you. Your fate is intertwined with His. Your subconscious might have detected something unusual through this connection.”

Lumian grasped Madam Magician’s meaning to some extent and pondered for a moment.

“After completing the full psychiatric treatment, can Madam Susie directly awaken my subconscious and inquire about the meaning of the different symbols?”

“It’s extremely risky. When the time comes, we’ll have to rely on the joint opinion of the two Psychiatrists to decide if it’s worth attempting,” Madam Magician replied thoughtfully. “But that’s a long way off. Before then, I can assist you in finding Beyonders skilled in decrypting symbolism to see if we can accurately interpret it without relying solely on your subconscious. Would you like that?”

“Alright,” Lumian agreed eagerly.

Then, he asked with concern, “What about the potential Termiboros ally lurking nearby? Are we not going to do anything about them?”

Madam Magician remained calm as she answered, “Now that we have sensed this possibility, I don’t think they will risk staying close to you. Of course, I will continue to keep watch.”

She then inquired, “Do you plan to continue the mission assigned to you by the Aurora Order? Many people probably witnessed you charging toward the Tree of Shadow. This will raise Gardner Martin’s suspicions.

“If you don’t want to take the risk, inform Mr. K about it. He will likely be delighted that you’ve slain a Fallen Tree Spirit and thwarted the Bliss Society’s plan. He can assign you a new mission.

“If you wish to proceed, I can arrange for someone to blur the memories of those who saw you. In any case, it’s normal for your exact appearance and physical characteristics not to be clearly discerned in that environment.”

Without hesitation, Lumian declared, “I wish to proceed.”

Gardner Martin, a Sequence 6 or Sequence 5 of the Hunter pathway, commanded a formidable group of Hunters. If Lumian continued to interact with him and joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order, there was a high chance of acquiring the potion formulas and main ingredients after Pyromaniac.

Through these experiences, Lumian had gained a profound understanding of the disparities between Sequences, the terror of powerful individuals, and his own limitations. He felt an urgent need to enhance his strength. It was a sharp contrast to his initial nonchalance upon arriving in Trier, where he sought hope amidst confusion.

Only by becoming strong enough could he withstand misfortune and unveil the truth behind the catastrophe in the perilous world of mysticism. Only then could he discern whether various propositions using Resurrection as bait concealed sinister intentions!

Madam Magician nodded slightly, granting Lumian's request.

Prompted by their previous conversation, Lumian inquired with curiosity, "Has the Tree of Shadow been dealt with?"

"How could that be?" Madam Magician scoffed. "Even if both Churches requested divine intervention, the Tree of Shadow would remain unresolved. Heh heh, it's not impossible, but the price is exorbitant, deterring anyone from paying it."

"What sort of price?" Lumian pressed further.

As if taking a leisurely stroll, Madam Magician moved two steps to the side of the hill.

"After being nourished and exerting influence for over a thousand years, the Tree of Shadow has become one with Trier. It's akin to its shadow, its dark aspect. Unless we obliterate the entire city and exterminate every inhabitant, not even a true deity could fully eradicate it.

"Of course, we could relocate Trier elsewhere and resettle its entire population. Then, after five to six years, when the Tree of Shadow has weakened due to the loss of nourishment, we could uproot it. However, by doing so, the other perils lurking beneath Trier would become uncontrollable."

There are other dangers? Lumian furrowed his brow.

Isn't the underground of Trier too daunting?

Perplexed, he asked, "Why wasn't the Tree of Shadow destroyed when it was first planted?"

Madam Magician chuckled.

"Well, wasn't it due to the urgency of constructing the city and countering certain underground threats? They failed to notice someone secretly planting the Tree of Shadow."

She didn't divulge details about the dangers, implying that Lumian didn't need to know them at present.

Lumian keenly sensed this and sealed his lips.

Madam Magician looked at him and let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“Are you unhappy that I sent you directly to Trier and involved you in a series of perilous affairs without providing corresponding assistance?”

“No,” Lumian replied, puzzled by Madam Magician’s question.

From his perspective, accepting missions, completing tasks, and reaping rewards seemed fair enough. And throughout this process, Madam Magician would offer guidance through letters.

Apart from the past few years of adoption, Lumian had long grown accustomed to not relying entirely on others and making full use of the various resources at his disposal to achieve his goals.

Madam Magician chuckled.

“Didn’t you see the Major Arcana card summoned by the Two of Cups? It happened because she was coincidentally in Trier. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have been so effortless and effective.”

She paused for a moment before continuing, “If I were to treat you as an extension of my eyes and hands, a loyal subordinate devoid of your own will, I could allow you to recite my name and provide ample assistance to ensure your safety most of the time. However, you chose the Hunter pathway. It’s a path that demands combat and a strong sense of self.

“A flower nurtured in a greenhouse cannot become a qualified Hunter. It’s immensely challenging for a Hunter, who always fights within their comfort zones with a patron, to attain godhood and become a saint. In due time, they will have to invest more time and pay a higher price to compensate for their present deficiencies.

“What kind of person do you aspire to be?”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before responding, “I want to be the one who makes those scoundrels tremble.”

His answer was unequivocal.

Madam Magician nodded in satisfaction.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean I won’t care about you. I will still reply to your letters, provide my opinions, and even extend assistance upon request. However, I don’t want you to feel perpetually shielded.”

Lumian nodded, signifying his understanding.

He recalled Susanna Mattise’s swift recitation of certain words to seek high-level assistance. Combining that with the keywords mentioned by Madam Magician, he spoke thoughtfully,

“Can reciting the honorific name of a specific entity draw their attention and receive corresponding aid through prayer?”

“Yes,” The Magician nodded subtly. “However, it requires the sufficient goodwill of the other party. Once you reach a certain stage, I will also disclose my name to you. Yes, you are aware of Mr. Fool’s honorific name, but without a ritual, simply reciting it will be difficult to elicit an effective response. It may even have adverse consequences. This is because Mr. Fool is contending with an ancient deity. The outcome will determine the fate of us all and whether this world can survive the apocalypse.”

Mr. Fool? The abbreviation for that mighty existence is The Fool? Truly befitting of a secret organization that employs tarot cards as their codenames… When Lumian heard of The Fool, he instinctively connected it to the tarot cards he encountered daily, rather than associating it with the honorific name. It seemed more like a description.

Madam Magician changed the subject and glanced at the tree trunk in Lumian’s hand.

“This is a valuable item. Attacks without godhood cannot harm it, and upon striking a target, it may trigger a particular desire.

“If you acquire Beyonder characteristics that align with it, you can find a way to employ a saint-level Artisan to combine them, turning it into a mystical item.

“You shouldn’t carry it with you at all times, though. Otherwise, your desires will gradually spiral out of control. It poses great danger for Beyonders who consume potions.”

Just as she finished speaking, Madam Magician turned her head slightly, as if listening to something. Then, she addressed Lumian, “That will be all for today.”

In the blink of an eye, Lumian’s vision filled with a blend of vibrant colors and ethereal, indescribable creatures.

In the next moment, Rue Anarchie appeared before him, riddled with cracks.

Madam Magician had vanished,

leaving Lumian bewildered as he hastily donned the clothes and pants he held in his hands.

His attention was then drawn to Franca, standing not far away.

Simultaneously, the two of them exchanged smiles.

Before they could convey their shared sense of being part of the same secret organization, Jenna emerged from the alley shadows, dressed in a grayish-blue gown.

Lumian and Franca instinctively went on guard.

Jenna winced, gripping her wounded ribs, yet expressed joy, “Dammit! You guys are alright!”

She appears genuine… Franca mumbled and approached her, concern etched on her face. “What happened to you? Why are you injured?”

Jenna cast nervous glances around and lowered her voice.

“I assassinated Hugues Artois and ended up getting shot.”

“Dammit! You succeeded? And you managed to escape?” Franca exclaimed, taken aback.

Even she didn’t believe she could pull off such a feat.

What was this called? This was the embodiment of a true assassin!

Lumian noticed a few passersby on Rue Anarchie, so he interrupted Jenna.

“We can discuss it once we reach Auberge du Coq Doré. I’ll extract the bullet and treat your wounds.”

“I still have half a vial of Healing Agent,” Franca chimed in happily.

She supported Jenna and, following the shadows along the roadside, they made their way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

As they neared their destination, they encountered Anthony Reid, the information broker.

Lumian chuckled derisively.

“I thought you’d have escaped.”

“I still have some unfinished business in the market district,” Anthony Reid replied vaguely.

The four of them took a few more steps and laid their eyes upon the beige five-story building.

Auberge du Coq Doré leaned a little more than before. Cracks marred its walls, intertwined with withering vines and branches.

As the remaining tenants had yet to return, it exuded an indescribable dilapidation and silence.

…

It had been some time since the catastrophe.

Amidst the crowd, a young man dressed plainly disembarked from the steam locomotive, carrying an old suitcase. He left the platform behind and strolled all the way to Rue Anarchie.

There, he laid eyes upon the beige five-story building, its surface adorned with streaks of vibrant red paint.

“Auberge du Coq Doré,” he murmured, reciting the name of the establishment. He reached into his pocket, feeling the banknotes and coins, realizing it was likely within his means.

To his surprise, Auberge du Coq Doré was much cleaner than he had envisioned. While certain areas were plastered with outdated newspapers and cheap pink paper, there were no signs of the ubiquitous bedbugs, repugnant phlegm, or various types of rubbish.

After renting Room 302 for 15 verl d’or, the young man climbed the stairs with his suitcase, feeling content.

It’s even more affordable than I thought. A clean motel like this costs only 15 verl d’or per month…

Once he had stowed away his suitcase in the cramped room, he decided to treat himself to a drink using the money he had saved.

In the Capital of Joy, one had to play the part!

He made his way to the underground bar, immediately engulfed by the lively clamor as he stepped inside.

A man in a shirt and bow tie, beer in hand, flailed his short arms, energetically expounding to the people around him. Others reveled, singing and dancing, refusing to be subdued.

At the bar counter, a few patrons sat with an intriguing contraption.

Curiosity piqued, the young man approached, examining the rubber hose and glass canister of the device. He asked with fascination, “What is this?”

A handsome customer with blond hair streaked with black turned his body and responded with a bright smile,

“It’s called the Idiot Instrument that tests an individual’s intelligence. Or you could say that it measures a person’s foolishness.”

(End of Volume Two—Lightseeker)

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Chapter 264 - 264 Secret Organization

264 Secret Organization

Volume Opening: Everyone is a hunter, and everyone is prey.

“Deputy Director of Loen Kingdom’s MI9 Spotted in the Crossfire of Market District Terror!”

“Fiery Debate at National Convention: Eternal Blazing Sun Church’s Role in Hugues Artois Assassination!”

“Shocking Malpractice!”

“Negotiating the Limits: Two Churches in Talks Over Parliamentary Immunity Restrictions”

“No Oath, No Immunity: Debating the Rights of Unsworn Members”

“National Convention or Heretic Haven?”

“Hugues Artois Shielding Heretics Behind Market District Terrorism!”

The headlines from different newspapers stood out, capturing Jenna’s attention under the blazing afternoon sun. She scanned the newspapers’ headlines, witnessing the fervent debate taking place from different angles.

Jenna’s gaze eventually settled on the wanted posters adorning the newsstand’s side.

“Guillaume Bénet…”

“Pualis de Roquefort…”

“Lumian Lee…”

“Celia Bello…”

Jenna stared at her own poster, finding it peculiarly enchanting.

The portrait displayed bore no resemblance to her; her features were almost reversed, except for her undeniable beauty. Even her brother Julien would fail to recognize her as his sister, let alone any bounty hunters.

And so, Jenna continued her studies at the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons by day, and entertained audiences with her voice at the Salle de Bal Brise by night, making ends meet. Her life remained unchanged, just as it had been.

If it weren't for the daily newspaper debates surrounding Hugues Artois's demise and the ensuing conflicts, Jenna would have doubted whether her act of assassinating him was merely a dream born out of emotional turmoil.

Based on Franca's findings and her own speculations, the official Beyonders seemed to appreciate Jenna's elimination of Hugues Artois. They believed she had made a significant contribution in eradicating a group of heretics. Had it not been for the pressure from the National Convention and the various restrictions in place, they might have even considered honoring Jenna with a medal.

Hence, they intentionally spread misleading information, crafting a wanted poster that deviated from reality. They employed an investigation as a pretext to aid Jenna's brother, Julien, in purging the malicious powers that had destabilized his emotions. They cured his latent psychological illness and provided him with a legitimate occupation as a fitter, all under the guise of humanitarianism and support for believers.

For Jenna, aside from the necessity to avoid her neighbors whenever she encountered Julien, her life remained relatively unhindered. She pursued her studies in theater acting and transformed into Showy Diva whenever the need arose.

Drawing from Franca's experience, if Jenna lingered in the market district for a few more days, the Purifiers of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church would likely approach her, sharing common knowledge and taboos to prevent any accidental disasters caused by her wild Beyonder powers. They might even attempt to recruit her as an informant.

If it were a Beyonder from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, they might choose to observe her covertly, trailing her steps and uncovering the source of her Beyonder characteristic. Depending on the circumstances, they would determine whether to apprehend her immediately and transform her into an informant or play the long game to capture more significant players. The Purifiers, on the other hand, would likely adopt a more transparent approach, considering Jenna's substantial assistance in their cause.

Jenna paid little mind to these matters. If the official Beyonders sought her capture, she would flee. If they wished to recruit her as an informant, she would comply. And if they disregarded her altogether, she would continue working to repay her debts and save for next year's tuition.

Retracting her gaze, Jenna, dressed in a grayish-white gown, stepped out of Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. She turned towards Rue des Blouses Blanches, seeking some rest before adorning her face with smoky and decadent makeup, preparing to become the captivating Showy Diva at the Salle de Bal Brise.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca, clad in a blouse, light-colored breeches, and wooden slippers, warmly greeted Lumian.

“Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons proves more profitable than anticipated!”

At the heretic’s estate charity auction for the post-disaster reconstruction, Gardner Martin had acquired Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons for 50,000 verl d’or and entrusted its management to Franca. Most of the profits were left in her hands as his mistress.

During the auction, he had also secured Auberge du Coq Doré for 2,000 verl d’or. Occasionally, he dispatched individuals to conduct peculiar investigations, as if seeking to uncover the truth behind the disaster.

Lumian undoubtedly took charge of the daily operations.

As the weather warmed, Lumian embraced the change by donning a light brown pair of trousers, a crisp white shirt, and a black waistcoat. He didn’t bother with a coat.

Rather than inquire about the profits of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Lumian surveyed the surroundings and posed a question.

“I wish to know more about the secret organization we’ve joined.”

He had initially assumed Franca would inform him at an opportune moment. However, after waiting for several days, it seemed Franca had forgotten about the matter, leaving Lumian no choice but to seek answers himself.

Franca was taken aback, her surprise evident as she blurted out, “You don’t know?”

You joined without any knowledge of the organization?

Had it not been for Madam Judgment’s confirmation that Lumian was a member, Franca would have suspected he was bluffing and hadn’t actually joined.

Lumian explained sincerely, “I was on probation before, and after passing the assessment, my Major Arcana card left it to you to reveal the details.”

Franca accepted the explanation, recalling her own limited knowledge during her early days with the organization.

She settled back into the recliner, crossing her legs and straightening her posture.

“We are all members of the Tarot Club.”

Tarot Club… Upon hearing the name, Lumian, already seated on the opposite sofa, showed no surprise. After all, members of this clandestine group adopted tarot cards as their code names. The core members were associated with the Major Arcana cards, while ordinary members bore the Minor Arcana cards.

Franca's face gradually lit up with pride.

"Our Tarot Club is the most exceptional secret organization in the entire world. One could even argue it is among the most powerful."

"That's because our leader is a supreme entity standing at the apex of all deities. In other secret organizations, the deities they serve merely watch over and provide divine insight. They do not actively participate. However, before Mr. Fool descended into a deep slumber, He regularly convened gatherings in His divine kingdom for the Major Arcana cardholders. What do we call it? A true Divine Council! Other Churches may have so-called Divine Councils, but at best, they are meetings held under the watchful gaze of a deity. It is not a gathering conducted in the presence of a deity with the deity's direct involvement."

Franca pressed a hand to her chest and offered a slight bow.

"Praise The Fool!"

Lumian had contemplated the Tarot Club's potential. After all, Madam Magician exuded an air of mystery and power. Yet, he never anticipated that the great existence she spoke of would be the leader of the Tarot Club.

This shattered his preconceived notions of deities.

After a moment of contemplation, he voiced his thoughts.

"Is Mr. Fool called 'The Fool' because He holds The Fool card from the Major Arcana?"

So He, too, is a member of the Tarot Club?

"That is partly the reason," Franca replied after a brief pause. "However, no one can confirm it. I suspect it is because 'The Fool' is one of the many honorific names bestowed upon Mr. Fool. Hence, when establishing the secret organization, He chose the name 'Tarot Club' and assigned different tarot cards to each member."

"But can we really address Him directly as 'Mr. Fool'?" Lumian questioned, finding it somewhat blasphemous or disrespectful to refer to a deity using the honorific 'Mr.' It seemed too ordinary and lacked the necessary sanctity.

Franca smiled and assured him, "There is no issue. It is said that Mr. Fool Himself quite enjoys this form of address."

Seeing that Lumian had no further inquiries, Franca continued.

“In many ritualistic magics, if you are unable to find a suitable recipient for your prayers, you can seek aid from Mr. Fool. Although the process may differ from your expectations, it will invariably lead to the desired outcome in a wondrous manner.”

“The only caveat is that Mr. Fool is in a deep slumber, and we must not disturb Him too often. According to my Major Arcana card, we should not do so more than once a month unless absolutely necessary. Reciting His honorific name alone will not draw attention or assistance. In fact, it may result in failure and pose a certain risk. The power inadvertently released by a slumbering deity is capable of obliterating us countless times over. Thus, we must perform a ritual to ensure our safety.”

Madam Magician had mentioned this before, but as per her explanation, Mr. Fool’s slumber holds more significance than mere sleep… Franca seems unaware of the details? Lumian contemplated this as he asked thoughtfully, “What kind of deity is Mr. Fool?”

Franca cleared her throat and replied, “My lecture wouldn’t do it justice. Haha, I don’t remember all that much. I suggest you visit Mr. Fool’s cathedral and listen to the bishop’s sermons.”

“Mr. Fool’s cathedral?” Lumian exclaimed in surprise.

Was there a cathedral dedicated to Mr. Fool in Trier?

Weren’t there only two Churches in Intis?

Franca explained, “Mr. Fool’s Church primarily resides in the Rorsted Archipelago of the Sonia Sea and some locations in the Southern Continent. However, due to the beliefs of many merchants, sailors, bounty hunters, and treasure seekers at sea, we often encounter followers of Mr. Fool at Lavigny Docks in the square district.”

“Later, for certain reasons, the two Churches agreed to construct a small cathedral there for Mr. Fool’s Church, allowing passing sea merchants to offer their prayers. However, proselytizing or preaching outside the cathedral is strictly prohibited. Most Trieriens are unaware of its existence.”

The square district lay on the north bank of the Srenzo River, west of Trier. Lavigny Docks bustled with various goods arriving from numerous seaside ports. Sea merchants frequently passed through, while sailors sought to experience the vibrancy and prosperity of Trier.

To the west of Lavigny Docks stood Trocadéro Town, renowned for its Trocadéro liquor.

Lumian nodded and said, “I shall find time to visit and listen.”

With that settled, he asked curiously, “What is the connection between Mr. Fool’s Church and our Tarot Club?”

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Chapter 265 - 265 The Major Arcana Cards

265 The Major Arcana Cards

Franca, sitting cross-legged in the recliner, had long pondered over this question. After careful consideration, a smile curved on her lips as she spoke,

“Mr. Fool’s Church is akin to an independent subsidiary of our Tarot Club.”

Observing Lumian’s bewilderment, she went on to explain, “Each of our Tarot Club’s Major Arcana Cards represents an influential figure in the world, be it in reality or mysticism. I suspect that the Pope of The Fool’s Church is one such figure. As for the other Major Arcana Cards, they may lead different organizations. While these organizations might not believe in Mr. Fool, they can provide assistance to certain operations of the Tarot Club.”

“To put it simply, the Tarot Club is the highest governing body directly overseen by Mr. Fool. Each holder of a Major Arcana card possesses a distinguished status and their own sphere of influence. And one such holder is The Fool’s Church,” Franca elaborated.

Lumian grasped Franca’s meaning roughly and inquired, “How many Major Arcana cards do we have?”

Franca shook her head and replied, “I cannot provide an exact number as the identities of the Major Arcana card holders are kept confidential. The only card we interact with the most is the Major Arcana card to which we are subordinate. Well… mine is Madam Judgment.”

“Mine is Madam Magician,” Lumian added.

Franca chuckled, “It seems that these two cards often appear together. Yes, our Tarot Club has a habit of scattering the entire deck of tarot cards at the scene after completing a task. We also place the card that represents us in the most prominent position…”

“Isn’t that wasteful?” Lumian interrupted Franca.

“What harm is there in using a deck of tarot cards? Don’t you find such actions cool?” Franca muttered. “You can leave the card that represents you, but what use is a deck without one? You’ll have to buy a new one next time. If you visit the factory and customize a large number of tarot cards with just one card, you’ll become an easy target.”

“I can draw it myself,” Lumian proposed, already formulating a solution.

While he couldn’t replicate the printed quality, he could capture the main characteristics of the Seven of Wands.

Franca fell silent for a moment, then said, “Wouldn’t something you draw have a mystical connection? Wouldn’t you have to expend energy to counter divination?”

“Sigh, we don’t have to scatter them every time. We don’t have to scatter them when working with non-Tarot Club members. We don’t have to scatter them during stealth missions, such as the one we’re on now. And we don’t have to scatter them when we’re under suspicion.

“Dammit! How did we get off track? What I wanted to convey is that due to the Tarot Club’s customs and traditions, I’ve learned from various newspapers and mystical gatherings about the more active Major Arcana cards.

“Madam Justice has appeared multiple times on the Midseashire coast, in Trier, and Backlund. Mr. Hanged Man has made appearances at sea. We have Madam Hermit and Mr. Sun, as well as Mr. Moon and Mr. Star from the Southern Continent. As for any other Major Arcana card holders, I’m unaware.”

Madam Justice, Mr. Hanged Man, Mr. Sun, Madam Hermit, Mr. Star, Mr. Moon… Lumian realized that the names possessed an air of mystery and sophistication, unlike the mundane-sounding Seven of Wands and Two of Cups.

After pondering for a while, he recognized a crucial point mentioned by Franca: Madam Justice had been seen in Midseashire, Trier, and Backlund.

Apart from Madam Judgment and Madam Magician, this was the only Major Arcana card with confirmed sightings in Trier.

Lumian distinctly recalled that Madam Susie had mentioned the possibility of people from the West Midseashire Coast being Beyonders of the Spectator pathway.

This implied that she had a good understanding of the West Midseashire Coast.

Considering that she and the other Psychiatrist were in Trier, their areas of activity overlapped by at least two-thirds with Madam Justice’s.

Furthermore, when Madam Magician mentioned that the two Psychiatrists were equals and that his psychological problem involved matters at a higher level, Lumian suspected that one of them was Madam Justice.

Based on the fact that both Madam Magician and Madam Judgment preferred to address themselves with tarot cards and conceal their true names, it was more likely that the enigmatic lady sitting across from him was the holder of the Major Arcana card, Justice. Susie, on the other hand, seemed to be her subordinate Minor Arcana card.

With these thoughts in mind, Lumian glanced at Franca, who had adjusted her sitting position, and spoke, “Were you planning to find a genuine Psychiatrist for Jenna’s brother from within our Tarot Club?”

Franca, confused by Lumian’s sudden change of topic, was taken aback.

“No, I intended to approach members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

“I try my best not to contact my Major Arcana, Madam Judgment unless it’s a particularly critical or serious matter. Although she always appears composed and willing to help, do you know? She’s a true demigod and a prominent figure with godlike status. I can’t burden her with trivial matters frequently. She says she doesn’t mind, but who knows if she’s truly honest. Each insignificant problem might decrease her favor towards me.

“When her favorability drops to a certain extent, a demigod has numerous ways to make your life unbearable. Besides, you won’t even know why it’s happening.

“I usually handle things on my own. If that fails, I turn to Gardner Martin or the members of the Research Society. And if that doesn’t work, I consider reaching out to Madame Judgment.”

Lumian shared the same sentiment, but he had the excuse of reporting the mission’s situation and suppressing Termiboros’s influence. He could write to Madam Magician from time to time to gather information.

In any case, he was already in the process of writing a letter. There was no harm in asking!

Observing that Franca’s Psychiatrist wasn’t the same as his own, Lumian didn’t mention Susie. He nodded gently and replied, “Same here.”

Franca glanced around and lowered her voice.

“However, don’t hesitate to seek help when you need it. The resources and influence wielded by Major Arcana card holders exceed your imagination. What you find difficult can be resolved with a mere command or thought.

“Wasn’t my mystical item, the Ring of Punishment, incredibly powerful? Madame Judgment granted it to me directly upon my request. She even allowed me to owe an equivalent exchange for a period of time.

“Uh… I see how you obtained the Pyromaniac potion formula and its main ingredient so quickly!”

You’re not wrong… Lumian smiled, conveying to Franca that she had hit the mark.

He believed that if he could acquire Beyonder characteristics that complemented the Shadow Branch, he could genuinely seek the help of Madam Magician in finding a saint-level Artisan to craft the corresponding mystical item.

Compared to him, who was only a Sequence 7, Madam Magician, already a demigod, was more likely to be acquainted with a high-level Artisan!

Franca exhaled and continued the conversation.

"Every bearer of a Major Arcana card is a demigod, with a high probability of being a saint. At the very least, the more active ones don't seem to be at the level of Grounded Angels. However, Madam Judgment told me that the Tarot Club has more than one angel!"

At least eight saints, and more than one angel? They're even stronger than the Aurora Order… Truly befitting the most extraordinary secret organization… Lumian sighed, wondering if the Tarot Club's core members were exaggerating to instill a stronger sense of belonging among their subordinates.

With a yearning expression, Franca added, "My current dream is to progress step by step to Sequence 5, then advance to Sequence 4 of the Hunter pathway and become a demigod. That would grant me the right to obtain a Major Arcana card.

"Not only would it mean greater strength and a sense of security, but it would also allow me to participate in the Divine Council and ask Mr. Fool about things once he awakens."

According to Madam Magician, obtaining a Major Arcana card isn't dependent on advancing to Sequence 4 and becoming a demigod… Lumian dealt Franca a blow to prevent her from having overly high expectations.

However, Franca didn't mind at all. She smiled and said, "In any case, my question will have to wait until Mr. Fool wakes up. When the time comes, demigods will undoubtedly be more qualified than other members to obtain a Major Arcana card."

At this point, she looked at Lumian and continued, "Apart from us, there are four more Minor Arcana cards active in Trier. In total, there are 23 cards in the world, but there might be fewer. Many Beyonders find it fashionable to scatter tarot cards at the scene of an incident and intentionally imitate us. They might do it to misdirect the official Beyonders' investigation.

"In Trier, the most renowned card is the Knight of Swords. At the beginning of the year, he detonated a warehouse belonging to the Southern Continent's terrorist organization, the Rose School of Thought. The warehouse concealed a significant amount of explosives, and non-human remains were found at the scene…"

Lumian listened attentively to Franca's account, gaining a better understanding of the Tarot Club and the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana cards.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he asked, “Do Minor Arcana cards have gatherings in the world of mysticism?”

“No,” Franca shook her head again. “Unless we meet in person, like we have, we can only communicate through our respective Major Arcana cards. Yes, regular gatherings do take place between Major Arcana cards in Mr. Fool’s divine kingdom!

“However, Madame Judgment mentioned once that in urgent situations, with the assistance of our Major Arcana, we can communicate in a way that transcends reality, but such occurrences are rare.”

Lumian had no further questions. After chatting for a while, he heard Jenna’s footsteps ascending the stairs.

He stood up, preparing to leave.

“Where are you going?” Franca asked, puzzled.

At this hour, there was nothing for him to do in Salle de Bal Brise, so he might as well stay and play Fighting Evil, the game Emperor Roselle had “invented.”

Lumian smiled, a mix of emotions in his expression.

“To the catacombs.”

The ashes of the lunatic Flameng and the Ruhr couple were finally being laid to rest in the catacombs.

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Chapter 266 - 266 Catacombs

266 Catacombs

Outside the police headquarters in the bustling market district, Lumian, donning the enigmatic Prying Glasses, climbed aboard the carriage adorned with painted irises.

Two ordinary constables, clad in black uniforms, occupied the seats opposite, their feet resting beside three somber urns. The names of the departed flickered in fluorescent ink.

Taking his place across from them before the carriage slowly steered forward, Lumian caught the older constable's inquisitive gaze.

"What brings you here? What's your connection to these departed souls?"

He remembered that two of the deceased had neither kin nor friends, and the remaining one had distant relatives who trembled at the mere mention of the name Flameng. Not only were they unwilling to come and collect the ashes and relics, but they also reluctantly admitted that they were related by blood or marriage.

Lumian responded calmly.

"I'm their landlord, in a manner of speaking."

"Just the landlord?" The older constable appeared skeptical.

"Officer, a landlord is a person too. They can feel for others!" Lumian chuckled. "I've shared a drink or had a chat with them. Accompanying their remains into the catacombs isn't a big deal."

The younger constable feigned disinterest, gazing out the window, while the older constable exuded an air of familiarity.

"Youth suits you well. But in the motel or apartment business in the market district, you must guard against developing attachments to tenants. Otherwise, you'll either be deceived or heartbroken. After a few more such experiences, your enthusiasm for others will wane."

Lumian offered a perfunctory reply, and the constable broached another subject.

"We still have Flameng's belongings. His kin refuse to collect them. Would you like them? If not, we'll handle it ourselves."

“I’ll take a look when I return from the catacombs,” Lumian replied nonchalantly.

During the journey from the market district to the Place du Purgatoire in Quartier de l’Observatoire, the older constable chatted away, alternating between engaging Lumian and attempting to draw his colleague into conversation. His chatter seemed ceaseless.

Finally reaching their destination, Lumian disembarked from the carriage, cradling Ruhr’s ashes in his arms. Despite his outgoing nature, Lumian felt a newfound relief, as if his ears had been granted respite.

The catacomb administrator, whom Lumian had encountered before, awaited their arrival.

In his mid-thirties, of average build, with curly brown hair, a thick beard, and slightly upturned eyes, he sported yellow pants, a white shirt, and a blue vest.

“Kendall, why is it you again?” the older constable greeted him warmly.

Kendall held an unlit carbide lamp and smiled.

“Robert, I heard you were coming, so I made sure to delay my other duties and be here for you.”

As Kendall spoke, he scrutinized Lumian and emphasized, “You didn’t forget to bring the white candles, did you?”

“That will be the last thing I forget!” Robert, clutching Flameng’s urn, fumbled in his pocket and retrieved three white candles. He tossed one to his colleague and another to Lumian.

With everything in order, Kendall ignited the carbide lamp and turned around, leading them deeper into the darkness, down the stone staircase comprising 138 steps.

Along the way, they passed a heavy wooden door engraved with two imposing Sacred Emblems and traversed a hushed corridor where even the sound of their breaths seemed amplified.

Lumian was no stranger to such a foreboding atmosphere, but the young constable displayed signs of nervousness. He clutched Madame Michel’s urn tightly, seeking solace.

After traversing a broad avenue, illuminated by gas street lamps, the quartet arrived at the catacombs’ entrance.

The natural cavern, subsequently modified, stood silently in the dim yellow glow. Skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and reliefs depicting steam elements adorned both sides. Beyond them, an impenetrable darkness loomed.

Etched on the lintel were two inscriptions in Intisian:

“Halt!

“The Death Empire lies ahead!”

Although Lumian had witnessed this sight before, he still felt a profound sense of reverence.

Unlike his previous curiosity and confusion, he now keenly grasped the gravity conveyed by these warnings and the surrounding environment.

Beneath Trier’s surface lurked countless perils capable of obliterating the entire city and even Intis itself. These dangers included, but were not limited to, Trier, the Tree of Shadow, and invisible flames from the Fourth Epoch. The catacombs, situated here, were unlikely to be innocuous.

According to Osta Trul, a Secrets Suppliant, visitors who descended into the catacombs with lit white candles invoked the protection of a concealed entity, akin to a ritual.

Lumian couldn’t help but suspect that opening such a place to the public served to suppress some subterranean peril, much like the new city erected upon Trier in the Fourth Epoch.

Kendall turned to Lumian and the others.

“It’s time to light the candles. We must ensure they don’t go out before we leave the catacombs.

“If we happen to get separated, don’t panic. Look for a road sign. If you can’t find one, follow the black line above you until you reach the exit.”

With Kendall holding the carbide lamp, Lumian and the two others ignited their white candles, casting a soft yellowish glow.

As the four candles flickered gently, Kendall extinguished the carbide lamp and led the way through the boulder gate, entering the realm of the Death Empire.

Lumian followed closely behind, clutching the urn in one hand and the white candle in the other.

Suddenly, a chill swept over him, sending shivers down his spine.

But the cold didn’t originate from his surroundings; it emanated from deep within his heart, causing his hair to stand on end.

Simultaneously, Lumian felt eyes fixed upon him, their gazes piercing his soul.

Using the flame of his candle, he looked to his right and saw pits carved into the stone wall, each one containing a ghastly skeletal corpse.

The hollow-eyed skulls stared at him lifelessly, devoid of emotion.

Lumian didn't avert his gaze as he carefully observed the corpses. He realized that the eerie sensation of being watched didn't stem from them, yet the feeling remained.

An instinctive urge to activate his Spirit Vision surged within him, but he had changed since arriving in Trier. He had encountered enough to know that many warnings were inscribed with blood and tears by those who came before him.

I shouldn't look at what I shouldn't… Since it poses no danger to me, there's no need to search for the source of this abnormality… Lumian silently muttered, turning his attention to the police officers beside him.

They seemed oblivious to any anomaly and continued following the tomb administrator, Kendall, as if everything was normal.

This made Lumian suspect that the experience was a result of the qualitative change in his spirituality after his advancement to Pyromaniac.

It's good that you can't feel it… Lumian couldn't help but sigh.

Under the weight of countless gazes, his skin erupted in goosebumps.

He cautiously looked up and saw a thick black line painted on the top of the tomb, with an arrow pointing toward the exit.

As he advanced, Lumian noticed that both sides of the path were lined with bones. Some were nestled in pits along the stone walls, others were piled by the roadside, and some were covered by tattered garments. Some lay bare, stripped of all burial items, their skulls coated in a layer of dark green mold. The air carried a diluted scent of decay.

The catacombs were divided into multiple chambers, each designated by name, ensuring visitors could locate specific remains.

Lumian and his companions followed Kendall through the narrow passage between the tomb chapel and the tomb memorial pillar. Ahead, they saw dozens of yellowish candles.

At times, the flames clustered together like fireflies in the night, while other times they formed a river of dim starlight.

Lumian glanced around casually and spotted a bride, her face veiled in white, adorned in a sanctified gown. Beside her stood a groom in a black tailcoat, a floral handkerchief adorning his chest pocket. Surrounding them were 30 to 40 youths, holding lit white candles and laughing merrily.

“What’s happening?” Lumian couldn’t hide his confusion.

Kendall scoffed and explained, “It’s part of a wedding ceremony.

“Since last year, newlyweds have been bringing young guests into the catacombs, crossing paths with the deceased. It’s become a popular tradition in Trier. Young folks are always daring, taking pride in their courage and delighting in scaring others. I’ve seen guests purposely pick up skeletal hands and pat the bride and groom on the shoulder, nearly causing them to faint in fear.”

Oh, you Trierians… Lumian shook his head in amusement.

It didn’t take long for the four of them to reach their destination, the Tomb of Lights.

In the center stood a black pedestal, atop which an obelisk painted white bore the emblem of the Sun. At its peak rested an ancient, extinguished oil lamp. The walls and floor were filled with bones, urns, and countless tear bottles.

Upon entering, Lumian realized a problem.

“Where are Flameng’s relatives?”

He had wanted Flameng to rest alongside his children, wife, and parents.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian suddenly understood why Flameng hadn’t specified the location of his kin’s remains.

He felt guilty and self-reproachful. Flameng desired to be with his family, yet he didn’t dare approach them. He intended to stay in the same chamber and watch over them from a distance.

An indescribable sorrow enveloped Lumian as he stood silently, choosing to honor Flameng’s final wish. He found an empty spot and gently placed the urn of the troubled soul.

Once Robert and the others had arranged the urns of the Ruhr couple, the four of them offered simultaneous prayer, either uttering “Praise the Sun” or “By Steam.”

On their way back, they encountered the newlyweds and their young entourage.

As Lumian brushed past them, he noticed a young couple in the group. Seizing the moment when the tomb administrator’s attention waned, they impulsively attempted to blow out the white candle in their hands, curious to see what would happen.

Whoosh!

They had indeed done it.

The two yellowish flames were extinguished.

In that instant, Lumian's mind turned adrift.

Quickly regaining his composure, he realized the young couple had vanished without a trace.

They're gone… Lumian's eyes widened as he tried to comprehend the situation.

A few seconds later, he accepted the undeniable truth.

The young couple had truly vanished!

Lumian then shifted his gaze back to the entourage.

Whether it was the newlyweds leading the way, the attending guests, or those at the rear, no one seemed to notice anyone missing. They continued to smile, joke, and move forward.

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Chapter 267 - 267 Remains

267 Remains

For a moment, Lumian thought he must be seeing things.

There was no sign of the couple, nor any attempt to put out the candle flames!

If Lumian hadn't witnessed it himself and been well aware of the dangers lurking in Underground Trier, he might have questioned whether the problem was with his own mind rather than searching for any trace of the couple's existence.

The people behind the couple hastened their steps and caught up to the person in front, closing the sudden gap in the procession.

They showed no surprise, fear, or confusion.

Everything appeared normal.

Lumian, already aware of the countless unseen gazes fixed upon him, felt the goosebumps on his skin intensify.

Subconsciously, he glanced at Kendall, the tomb administrator, who led the way with two police officers, to gauge his reaction to the recent events.

Clad in yellow trousers and a blue vest, Kendall held an extinguished carbide lamp in one hand and a quietly burning white candle in the other. He walked directly toward the exit of the catacombs, seemingly oblivious to the strange happenings surrounding the entourage.

Suddenly, Kendall turned around and met Lumian's gaze.

"Is something the matter?" Kendall's deep voice reverberated through the passageway, echoing in the nearby skull chambers.

Lumian maintained a composed demeanor and replied calmly, "I'm afraid I might get lost."

Kendall nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Then I'll slow down."

He continued toward the exit, deliberately reducing his pace. He staggered slightly, remaining silent, resembling a zombie from a horror novel.

Lumian held the flickering yellow candle and passed by the laughing wedding party participants, who occasionally made eye contact with the white skulls. Thoughts raced through his mind.

They truly didn't notice that someone was missing…

When they leave the catacombs, will the families of the man and woman discover their absence?

I've always wondered. The catacombs are open to the public, and university students often take risks and dance among the bones. Are there truly no issues?

Even visitors guided by the catacomb administrators disobey the warnings, let alone youngsters who venture in with a solitary white candle…

Initially, I believed there were safety measures or that accidents were infrequent enough not to deter those individuals. Now, it seems to be a different matter altogether…

Lumian suspected that not only would the body of the person "consumed" by the catacombs vanish, but even the memory of their existence would be erased from the minds of friends and relatives!

Why can I remember them? Could it be because Termiboros is sealed within me, connecting my fate to His to some extent?

Why do the government and the two Churches continue to open such a perilous place to the public? Do the catacombs require a constant flow of living people to keep something suppressed? Are those who disregard the warnings deemed necessary sacrifices? The more Lumian dwelled on it, the more his hair stood on end. He forced himself not to delve further into the analysis.

Without sufficient information, he couldn't explore the matter any deeper.

Regardless, there was nothing worth investigating within the catacombs. Visiting occasionally posed no threat as long as he adhered to the rules!

Once they entered the catacombs, the "talkative" police officer, Robert, fell silent, clearly uncomfortable in the environment.

With his silence, the conversation ceased. In an indescribable silence, the quartet retraced their steps to the natural entrance adorned with intricate reliefs and emerged back into the open.

As soon as Lumian crossed the threshold, he sensed the countless invisible gazes vanish.

The chill in his body dissipated, and his skin quickly returned to normal.

“Phew…” Robert exhaled deeply. “I always feel uneasy whenever I’m in the catacombs. Kendall, how can you go in more than ten times a day and still be so cheerful?”

Kendall chuckled and replied, “Do you think we remain unaffected? If we’re not on night duty, those with families rush to find their wives. If not, they head to places like Rue de la Muraille and bask in the warmth of others.”

“To be honest, after spending so much time here, I feel as if I’m slowly turning into a corpse.”

As they conversed, Kendall lit the carbide lamp and extinguished the candle in his hand.

Returning to the surface, Robert glanced at the police headquarters carriage parked outside the entrance building and sheepishly smiled at his colleague and Lumian.

“That prolonged discomfort makes me need to use the loo. Wait for me. I’ll go to the restroom first.”

With that, he headed toward the two-story building, painted a muddy gray, which served as the ticket office for the catacombs.

Lumian gazed at the stone-engraved dome and positioned himself by a pillar at the edge, absentmindedly observing the pedestrians on Place du Purgatoire. The other police officer boarded the carriage and settled in to wait.

At that moment, Lumian felt a sudden chill.

It resembled the sensation he experienced upon entering the catacombs, though not as intense.

Instinctively, he warily turned around and saw Kendall, the tomb administrator, standing behind him, wearing an expressionless face.

“What’s the matter?” Lumian calmly inquired.

Kendall, with his thick brown beard, spoke in a deep voice, “What were you looking at?”

Lumian’s heart sank as he responded with a mixture of sincerity and pretense,

“Which aspect are you referring to?”

“When we passed by that group of people on our way back.” Kendall’s tone remained neutral.

Lumian acted as though a light bulb had switched on.

“I find the concept of a wedding among the dead quite intriguing. They seemed unafraid and were enjoying themselves.”

Kendall scrutinized him for a couple of seconds before nodding.

“Don’t imitate them.”

With that, the tomb administrator carried the unlit carbide lamp and made his way toward the muddy gray building that housed them.

Before long, police officer Robert jogged back, and the carriage departed for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

…

In the Evidence Room deep within the corridor on the first floor of the market district’s police headquarters, Robert led Lumian to a wooden frame divided into multiple compartments and pointed to one of them.

“Here, Flameng’s belongings.”

Among the items, there was a dark suitcase, a fountain pen, paper, an ink bottle, and several large books crammed inside.

Lumian pulled out one of the books and quickly skimmed through its pages. He realized it was a mineralogy textbook focusing on Trier’s underground rock formations. As an unschooled youth, the content proved challenging, with numerous unfamiliar words that were exclusive to mineralogy.

The other books were also mineralogy texts, some containing basic teaching materials while others comprised complex collections of papers.

Confirming this, Lumian retrieved the suitcase, placed it on the floor, and opened it.

Inside, along with two sets of clothes and daily essentials, the suitcase was filled with small grayish-white cloth bags. Each bag had a different name written on it with a fountain pen:

Flower, Sedge, Sheep…

These are the names Flameng mentioned, referring to the various rock strata beneath Trier… Could these bags contain corresponding mineral specimens? Lumian briefly recollected Flameng’s words and formed a rough idea of what the cloth bags contained.

Despite his madness, Flameng hadn’t forgotten to bring along his research subjects!

But all of this held little significance for Lumian, and he began contemplating letting the police headquarters handle them.

Just then, Termiboros's magnificent voice resonated in his ears.

"The cloth bag on the far right."

Oh, so a loser like you is finally speaking up again? Lumian's initial reaction was to mock Termiboros. However, he turned his gaze toward the cloth bag hinted at by the Inevitability angel, feeling a mix of surprise and suspicion.

The cloth bag rested on the far right side of the suitcase, sandwiched between Flameng's socks and his razor. Dark blue ink formed a combination of terms on its surface:

"Earth Blood."

Earth… Blood… Lumian, crouching beside the suitcase, silently muttered as he calmly picked up the cloth bag in front of the police officer, Robert, and opened it.

Inside the bag was a brown rock pockmarked with potholes. Each depression contained dark-red speckles, resembling blood seeping from the earth.

For some reason, just looking at it filled Lumian with a sense of frustration.

He refrained from touching the mineral specimen with his bare hands. Instead, he securely tied the cloth bag and placed it back in the suitcase.

He swiftly skimmed through the book detailing the materials found in Trier's underground rock formations, searching for answers.

With a clear target in mind, he quickly discovered the answer.

"Earth Blood rock stratum lies between 55 and 56 meters underground in Trier and has a thickness of approximately 0.76 meters… This is the deepest mineral we can gather. Beyond lies the forbidden Ancient Ruins Reserve…"

Beside this textbook description, Flameng's familiar handwriting jotted a few words:

"A small number of ores within the Earth Blood rock stratum are more peculiar than the others. They are suspected to contain volatile toxins that can induce irritability and lead to a mental illness known as mania.

"A researcher suddenly went berserk and slashed his colleague.

"To handle specific mineral specimens from the Earth Blood rock stratum, one must wear corresponding protective gear."

Earth Blood is a rock stratum near Fourth Epoch Trier? It's undeniably peculiar… No wonder Termiboros made me pay attention… As Lumian pondered, Robert urged, "Do you want them or not? Make a decision quickly!"

"Yes," Lumian responded, rising to his feet.

Even though he only desired the mineral specimen from the Earth Blood rock stratum and the mineralogy textbook detailing Trier's underground rocks, he signed and took possession of all of Flameng's belongings to avoid arousing suspicion.

Upon returning to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian neglected to wash off his enigmatic makeup. He whispered to Termiboros, "What makes this mineral specimen so special?"

Termiboros's voice echoed in Lumian's ears once more.

"Don't tell me you think it's normal for the Montsouris ghost to spare Flameng?"

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Chapter 268 - 268 Possible Encounters

268 Possible Encounters

Upon hearing Termiboros's question, Lumian felt a jolt of alarm.

He had never suspected that there might be something amiss with Flameng's prolonged stay at Auberge du Coq Doré, evading the clutches of the Montsouris ghost.

From Lumian's perspective, Flameng's immediate family and wife had already met their demise, and it was only a matter of time before he met a similar fate. The archives at Psychic's headquarters revealed instances where victims had been slain by the Montsouris ghost up to 11 months after encountering it. While Flameng's circumstances were rare, they were not unprecedented.

In an instant, Lumian's mind seized upon an intriguing detail.

The previous victims had all met their end within the same year of their encounter, whereas Flameng had crossed paths with the ghost last year. He had even sought the sanctuary of the clergy during the New Year festivities.

Although less than a year had passed since Flameng's encounter with the Montsouris ghost and his subsequent suicide, it was an unprecedented delay compared to the other cases.

"Could this Earth Blood ore be responsible for protecting Flameng, causing the Montsouris ghost to repeatedly postpone its actions and disrupt its usual patterns?" Lumian asked Termiboros, his voice hushed, seeking confirmation.

Termiboros was a true angel, devoid of power due to a perfect seal but possessing remarkable insight, knowledge, and level made Him capable of deciphering many matters.

Termiboros replied in a majestic voice, "It instills fear and repulsion in the Montsouris ghost, but it holds no power of its own. For you, this could be a crucial key."

"A key?" Lumian swiftly made numerous connections. "The key to a hidden chamber in Fourth Epoch Trier?"

Termiboros responded in an unusually deep voice, "You will inevitably enter Fourth Epoch Trier. It is where your destiny, both treacherous and serendipitous, awaits you.

“Rather than remaining passive, it would be wiser to explore proactively, leveraging the insights gained from each venture to better prepare yourself.”

“Aren’t you revealing your intentions too quickly?” Lumian couldn’t help but chuckle. “Are you trying to hasten my demise? So that you may utilize the unique underground environment to block the signal of the collapsing seal and ensure your own safe escape?”

Given that the Tree of Shadow hadn’t taken root in Fourth Epoch Trier, Lumian held no interest in venturing underground.

Without awaiting Termiboros’s response, he left the room and made his way to the nearest washroom, eager to wash off the mystical makeup that concealed his true identity.

Having eliminated the latent threat, Lumian settled at a wooden table and began to write.

It was clear that both Flameng and the Earth Blood ore were extraordinary cases. He couldn’t simply follow Termiboros’s directives; consulting Madam Magician was imperative.

If he lacked knowledge and blindly believed the words of an angel tied to an evil deity, he would inevitably suffer dire consequences, even risking his life.

Termiboros’s voice resonated once more.

“Can you truly trust this Magician, this Tarot Club, as they claim?

“They sealed me within your body instead of seeking my eradication. I fear they have ulterior motives, intending to exploit you for their nefarious purposes.”

“They cast you into Trier, the very heart of the storm, yet they displayed no concern nor made any inquiries about your well-being. Don’t you find this suspicious? It cannot be explained away as mere training.”

Lumian beamed and said with a sigh, “Have you never deceived or manipulated others in the past, relying solely on your status and abilities to achieve your goals?

“Would you like me to purchase a copy of the Art of Persuasion and read it aloud daily for your instruction?

“Allow me to enlighten you. Such tricks wouldn’t have ensnared me during my early teenage years. I am well aware of those I can depend on, my true friends, my adversaries, and those I must remain wary of.”

Termiboros fell silent, seemingly contemplating whether to acquire the art of rhetoric.

Lumian swiftly penned a letter to Madam Magician, detailing the recent developments, and entrusted it, along with the Earth Blood ore, to the puppet messenger he had summoned.

In due time, a reply arrived from Madam Magician, who returned the mineral specimen.

“I’m relieved to see that you remained cautious and didn’t fully trust Termiboros’s words.

“However, there is some truth to what He said. The ore lacks inherent power, but it carries remnants of unknown auras and characteristics, mostly dissipated. It won’t aid you directly, but it seems destined to bring about encounters in the future, which could be either beneficial or detrimental. Its current state is highly chaotic, making it difficult to provide an accurate interpretation.

“What Termiboros intentionally misled you about is that the fortuitous encounter He spoke of might not necessarily occur in Fourth Epoch Trier, but somewhere underground.

“If, in the future, you wish to explore the potential encounters and are prepared to take risks, carry it with you whenever you venture into Underground Trier. Alternatively, if you wish to avoid the risk, keep it safely stored in your room.

“The symbolic elements I mentioned previously have already begun to unfold. A friend of mine mentioned that he possesses great proficiency in deciphering such matters. Once he completes his current tasks, I will arrange for you to meet him…”

Suddenly, a blaze erupted from Lumian’s hand, reducing the letter to ashes.

Contemplating the words of both Madam Magician and Termiboros, Lumian couldn’t help but believe that the Earth Blood ore before him could trigger some kind of mutation within Underground Trier. It could lead to a fortuitous encounter or even claim his life.

For now, it’s best not to take unnecessary risks, Lumian thought, aware of his current strengths.

As a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, he had overcome any deficiencies in both close-quarters combat and long-range attacks, excelling in hand-to-hand combat and spellcasting. He had surpassed the limitations of an ordinary individual. However, Hunters leaned more towards conventional battles and lacked the peculiar abilities and methods to deal with the peculiarities of Underground Trier.

Lumian decided to wait until he had fully digested the Pyromaniac potion and obtained the Contractee boon. Then, he would consider carrying the Earth Blood ore based on the information he had gathered about Underground Trier.

It would be even better if he could transform the Shadow Branch into a mystical item before that.

Suppressing his thoughts, Lumian took the mineral specimen to Rue des Blouses Blanches and concealed it in his safehouse.

Before the afternoon sun waned, he delved into Aurore's grimoire, meticulously studying its contents alongside Franca's teachings and his own experiences with fire spells, searching for any potential issues.

After more than an hour, Lumian stumbled upon a section about summoning creatures from the spirit world and forging contracts.

His mind immediately turned to White Paper, Aurore's contracted creature.

The fragile spirit entity possessed the ability to withstand a specific ability of the contractor.

I wonder if the contract between Aurore and White Paper has been severed. According to the notebook, aside from the designated ritual, the contract can only be broken if one of the parties is completely deceased.

Regrettably, contracted creatures can only be summoned by the contractor and not by others like a messenger. Otherwise, I could utilize White Paper to determine if Aurore is truly deceased…

Hm… Is it possible that Aurore left behind any information with White Paper?

Lost in thought, Lumian's mind shifted to another matter that had previously escaped his notice.

Considering that Aurore occasionally gained clarity and assisted him in cutting up the livre bleu, reassembling letters, and seeking aid from the authorities, and since her initial response in the dream was to summon the messenger of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's Vice President, Hela, to seek her counsel, why didn't she occasionally summon the messenger when she was lucid and inform Madam Hela about her predicament?

In Madam Hela's earliest response to me, she clearly seemed unaware of the situation.

What prevented Aurore from making such an attempt?

Or could it be that she did summon a messenger, and Hela is concealing it?

Lumian narrowed his eyes. Without the accompanying memories, he couldn't discern the source of the problem.

For now, he wasn't overly suspicious of Hela, believing there must be another explanation.

It was worth noting that Hela's messenger knew Lumian's exact location. If the woman was truly entangled in Cordu's affairs and played a dishonorable role, she would undoubtedly wish to eliminate the final "survivor" without leaving any loose ends. Yet, all this time, she not only refrained from making any substantial moves but also kindly provided knowledge and suggestions.

For a moment, Lumian considered writing down his questions and sending them to Hela to gauge her response. However, he restrained himself, fearing that it might expose the king's new clothes and lead to unfavorable outcomes.

He decided to first have a conversation with Franca and gather opinions from her teammates in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and the Tarot Club regarding Hela's trustworthiness.

If Franca believed Hela to be reliable and had shared information about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society with her Major Arcana card, Lumian would request Madam Magician to keep a watchful eye before sending inquiries to Hela.

He forced himself to regain composure and resumed studying Aurore's grimoire. Only when evening arrived did he leave Rue des Blouses Blanches, making his way onto Avenue du Marché and entering his Salle de Bal Brise.

"Good evening, Boss!" Greetings echoed from all directions as Lumian nodded in acknowledgement and led Louis and Sarkota to the second floor.

Before he could settle in at the café, René, the dance hall manager, approached him.

The slender middle-aged man pressed a hand to his chest and bowed respectfully.

"Monsieur Ciel, Monsieur Martin requests your presence at Rue des Fontaines tomorrow at 10 a.m."

Boss wants to see me? Lumian was both surprised and delighted.

He was taken aback that Gardner Martin had sent for him despite the recent lack of incidents. Yet, he couldn't help but feel a sense of joy at the prospect of further interaction with Gardner Martin and the opportunity to gain his trust to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

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Chapter 269 - 269 Islander

269 Islander

“Alright.” Lumian nodded at Manager René.

Lumian dabbed his mouth with a napkin and rose to his feet. He strolled towards one of the café’s balconies, casting his eyes over the nocturnal scenery of Avenue du Marché.

The gas street lamps cast a soft, golden glow, illuminating the carriages and pedestrians that traversed the road.

At that moment, people streamed into Salle de Bal Brise one after another, joining the revelry within.

To be honest, Lumian preferred the cozy atmosphere of the basement bar at Auberge du Coq Doré to this place. It allowed him to unwind and find enjoyment.

From his perspective, the patrons of Salle de Bal Brise were excessively self-indulgent. They cared little for their families or their futures. All they sought was a night of revelry, drowning themselves in alcohol, beauty, dance, and uproar. In contrast, the regulars at the basement bar were mostly tenants of Auberge du Coq Doré. They would return around 9 or 10 p.m. and had to be in bed by 1 a.m. They drank, sang, boasted, and frolicked, making the most of those fleeting two to three hours to find their own slice of joy.

Only then did they gather the courage to face the arduous tasks of the following day and embrace the promise of a new dawn.

It was akin to kerosene lamps that required regular refueling to continue casting their light.

Lumian surveyed Avenue du Marché for a few minutes before his attention was abruptly drawn to a familiar figure.

There stood Charlie, adorned in a white shirt and blue waistcoat, embroiled in a street brawl, his formal coat casually slung over his arm.

Now we’re talking… Lumian smiled, a touch of nostalgia and sentimentality washing over him as he used an expression that had recently gained popularity.

Pressing his right hand against the balcony, Lumian gracefully leaped from the second floor, landing nimbly at the edge of Avenue du Marché. With a few brisk strides, he reached the scene of Charlie’s altercation.

He made no move to intervene or assist Charlie. Instead, he observed the fight with keen interest.

The other party engaged in this scuffle with Charlie was a slender young man in his mid-twenties, possessed of dark skin and sunken eyes. His lips were thick, and his slightly curly black hair marked him as a descendant of the Fog Sea Islander lineage. However, compared to his fellow islanders, he appeared somewhat more presentable.

“Cheat! You damn cheat!” Charlie spat out, his curses interwoven with their tussle.

The Islander, donning a blue shirt with a fountain pen tucked in his breast pocket, deftly dodged Charlie’s onslaught while offering an explanation.

“I didn’t want this to happen either. I, too, fell victim to deceit!”

“Dogsh*t!” Charlie’s kick missed its mark.

The two engaged in their amateurish scuffle until their breath grew ragged. Simultaneously, they slowed their movements and eventually ceased their struggle.

Only then did Charlie notice Lumian standing beside him, observing the brawl with a smile.

“Ciel, it’s Monette! That swindler! The one who conned me out of 10 verl d’or, nearly leaving me to starve!” Charlie’s face lit up as he eagerly revealed the identity of his Islander adversary. “Praise the Sun for granting me this encounter!”

The Islander whom Charlie deemed deserving of a dire fate… Lumian chuckled to himself.

“You’re partly to blame as well. Haven’t you heard the saying? ‘Never trust an Islander.’”

“I thought we were friends,” Charlie muttered, his frustration evident.

How could you be so na?ve and easily swayed? You too possess a certain knack for mischief… People like you can be easily ensnared by scheming individuals, falling into their traps without gaining either the affection or the riches you desire. Ah, you’ve already fallen victim… Lumian chastised, shifting his gaze towards the Islander named Monette.

Monette responded with an obsequious smile.

“I genuinely intended to help Charlie find employment, but I, too, fell prey to a scam and lost all my money.

“I couldn’t face Charlie, so I secretly departed from Auberge du Coq Doré.”

As he spoke, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a stack of banknotes, counting three 5 verl d'or bills. He handed them over to Charlie.

"I returned to the market district to find you and return your money, along with interest."

Charlie's emotions eased considerably as he verified the authenticity of the three banknotes under the glow of the street lamps. He asked, still somewhat suspicious, "Are you someone who gets scammed easily?"

Ever since Charlie had encountered Monette until his departure, he had only witnessed him conning others. He had never seen him on the receiving end of such deals. True to his Islander identity.

Monette sheepishly smiled and replied, "Not only was I swindled once, but I fell for it a second time.

"The first instance, I encountered a group of people who claimed that Salle de Bal Unique in Quartier de l'Observatoire wanted to expand and were offering shares for sale. Each lot cost a mere 200 verl d'or.

"You all know how lucrative the dance hall is. I couldn't resist dipping into my savings, but the share subscription certificate I received turned out to be counterfeit!

"I confronted them, only to be swindled once more."

Salle de Bal Unique… Lumian's eyelids twitched involuntarily.

The bankrupt merchant, Fitz, residing in Room 401 of Auberge du Coq Doré, had previously been duped out of 100,000 verl d'or by the owner of Salle de Bal Unique, Timmons. Fitz had sought Lumian's aid in recovering the sum, but Lumian had investigated and consulted several sources. He found the dance hall's practices dubious, possessing a formidable network. They appeared to wield considerable power, causing Lumian to abandon the commission.

Now, he had encountered another victim of Salle de Bal Unique.

"You were swindled by them once before. How did you fall for it a second time?" Charlie couldn't fathom such foolishness.

Monette cleared his throat twice.

"They openly confessed to being a group of swindlers and refused to return the money. They even said that reporting them to the authorities would be futile. Impressed by my skills, they asked if I was willing to learn the art of deception from them, allowing me to recoup my losses.

"In the end, they merely taught me what I already knew. They only gave me something else."

“What was it?” Charlie was always a curious one.

In the blink of an eye, Monette retrieved a transparent monocle from his pocket.

He smoothly placed it into his right eye socket.

For some reason, Lumian sensed an inexplicable change in Monette as soon as he wore the monocle. It was as if he had transformed into a different character altogether.

The corners of Monette’s mouth curled slightly as he positioned the monocle over his right eye. He glanced at Charlie first, then turned his gaze towards Lumian. His eyes shifted from Lumian’s face to his chest and hands.

Lumian felt a subtle unease, but he detected no immediate danger.

Monette smiled and said, “Are you Ciel, the mastermind behind the Idiot Instrument?”

“Yes.” Lumian did not deny it and remained silently cautious.

Monette adjusted the monocle on his right eye.

“Quite adept at pulling pranks, I must say.

“Would you like this monocle? It’s of no use to me. I could exchange it for some cash. With it, you can disguise yourself as a member of Salle de Bal Unique and earn a good amount of money there.”

Do I look like a fool to you? Lumian promptly rejected Monette’s suggestion without hesitation.

“I have no interest in donning monocles.”

He had always been skeptical of the peculiar rules of Salle de Bal Unique, keeping his guard up.

Disappointed, Monette redirected his gaze, removed the monocle, and turned to Charlie.

“I’ve given you the money and the interest. If you ever need anything in the future, come find me at Salle de Bal Unique.”

Charlie scoffed dismissively.

He still harbored suspicions that Monette had intended to scam him in the past.

After the Islander left Avenue du Marché, Lumian turned to Charlie.

“Remember to keep your distance from that fellow. Otherwise, you might end up encountering the same situation with Susanna Mattise.”

The latter part of his statement was a fabrication, primarily to instill fear in Charlie and ensure he took the advice seriously.

Charlie was instantly alarmed. Without questioning further, he hastily nodded and replied, “Alright, alright!”

…

At midnight, Lumian and Jenna, the latter wearing a sparkling red dress, exited Salle de Bal Brise and made their way towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Jenna did not inquire about the reason for their route. After a moment of silence, she spoke up.

“Have you ever felt like nothing matters? Lost and devoid of motivation?”

“Definitely,” Lumian replied casually, his gaze fixed on the street ahead. “In such moments, you must rediscover the meaning of life and determine what truly matters to you.”

Jenna fell silent once more. After a while, she asked, “Have you ever experienced something akin to an illusion shattering within you? A mysterious cosmos materializing, adorned with stars of varying sizes?”

“No,” Lumian replied after a brief pause.

He had experienced the sensation of illusory objects abruptly disintegrating. It occurred every time the potion was completely digested. However, he knew nothing of the mysterious cosmos or the glimmering stars of different magnitudes.

Jenna remained silent, deep in thought about the implications of this phenomenon or contemplating other matters.

Soon enough, they arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca was already back and regarded them warily as they entered side by side.

Before she could inquire, Jenna brought up the topic of the shattered illusions and the appearance of the mysterious cosmos.

Franca was taken aback but spoke joyfully, “Your Assassin potion has been fully digested! Assassinating a parliament member in public and under heavy security certainly facilitated the digestion process.”

Is this a sign of potion digestion? Lumian couldn’t hide his surprise and perplexity.

Why do I experience only the first half and not the second?

Franca scrutinized him suspiciously.

“You’ve never experienced it before? How did you advance then?”

Not only is the seal on me restraining Termiboros, but it also restricts some of my mystical senses? That’s right. The seal resides within me. It’s impossible for it to have zero impact… Lumian formed a vague hypothesis and casually brushed it off.

“It wasn’t as pronounced.”

Franca, more concerned about her female companion, did not press the matter further and curiously asked Jenna, “So, have you managed to summarize the principles of acting?”

“Acting principles?” Jenna pondered for a moment. “After the assassination, I learned many principles. Yes, assassination is a matter of risking one’s life. It is the ultimate form of punishment, a calamity for those criminals…”

Enthusiastically delving into the “acting method” and discussing acting principles with Jenna, Franca suddenly remembered Lumian’s presence.

“What—what’s the matter?” She glanced at her male companion, who had settled onto the sofa.

Lumian met her gaze and indicated that they needed to speak privately.

Jenna instantly understood, excused herself to change clothes, and retreated into the guest bedroom.

Lumian lowered his voice and addressed Franca, “What do you make of Hela? What kind of person do you think she is?”

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Chapter 270 - 270 Agreement

270 Agreement

“Madame Hela? How do you know her?” Franca’s immediate reaction was one of surprise and astonishment.

She quickly remembered that Lumian’s sister, Muggle, was also a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. She hastily added, “Did your sister mention Madame Hela to you?”

Lumian nodded.

“Not only did she mention her, but she also gave me the incantation to summon Madame Hela’s messenger.”

“Did she suggest seeking help from Madame Hela when you faced trouble?” Franca speculated. “Are you planning to summon Madame Hela’s messenger and ask if she can be trusted?”

“Sort of,” Lumian affirmed. “I’ve already established a connection with Madame Hela and summoned her messenger, but today I realized that some of my sister’s actions during the disaster in Cordu were unusual. It seems to be connected to Madame Hela. I don’t know if I should question her directly.”

Observing that Lumian hadn’t provided further details about the disaster in Cordu or Aurore’s abnormal behavior, Franca understood why and refrained from prying. She pondered and replied,

“Personally, I trust Madame Hela. Dammit, you’ve established a connection with her without even telling me!

“Well… She’s one of the most advanced members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society on the paths of the divine. There are suspicions that she belongs to the Corpse Collector pathway.”

“Not only does she willingly share her knowledge and experience with us, but she also offers assistance whenever possible. The items she trades are only slightly more expensive than their cost price.”

“To many of us, including your sister and me, Madame Hela is like a dependable older sister. She has rescued us from helplessness, anxiety, and indecision. We trust her implicitly.”

“Understood,” Lumian sighed with relief. “I’ll have an honest conversation with Madame Hela to uncover the true cause of the problem.”

At this point, he changed the subject.

“Does your Major Arcana card know about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society?”

“I haven’t mentioned it to her directly. All I said was that I joined a secret organization that provides mutual assistance. However, she seems to be aware of the Research Society’s situation,” Franca lowered her voice unconsciously. “I suspect I’m not the only member of the Tarot Club in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.”

With his lingering doubts cleared, Lumian turned around, smiling, and waved his hand.

“I’m going to summon Madame Hela’s messenger.”

“Hey, it’s still early. Want to play Fighting Evil for a couple of hours before heading back?” Franca, who wasn’t fond of going to bed early, tried to find some entertainment.

Lumian rejected her without hesitation.

When he returned to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian didn’t rush to summon Hela’s messenger. Instead, he unfolded a piece of paper and wrote to Madam Magician once again.

He briefly mentioned the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and informed the demigod that Aurore was willing to seek help anonymously from the authorities when she was lucid. However, she hadn’t summoned Hela’s messenger for advice, which didn’t align with her behavior in Lumian’s dream. He didn’t know if Aurore was under another restriction or if there was an issue with Hela.

Before long, Madam Magician replied with a simple line: “Based on the information we have, Hela is trustworthy.”

Phew… Lumian relaxed and began writing a letter to Madame Hela.

In the letter, he candidly pointed out Aurore’s abnormality and asked if she had missed receiving any letters.

Skilled in the process, Lumian made slight adjustments to the altar and changed the ingredients. He swiftly summoned a human skull that appeared to be made of pure silver.

As he gazed at the pale-white flames silently burning in the skull’s eye sockets, Pyromaniac Lumian felt a greater sense of danger emanating from it than ever before.

It was no less intense than the feeling he got from Madam Magician's puppet messenger!

The pure silver skull clamped onto the letter and vanished into the dense darkness around it.

Lumian didn't rush to tidy up the altar. He patiently waited.

As time ticked by, a letter suddenly materialized on the wooden table in front of him, and he hadn't sensed its arrival until the end.

Of course, this was a significant improvement from before. Previously, he only noticed it after the pure silver skull had placed the letter.

Lumian unfolded the letter and swiftly scanned it under the glow of the two yellow candles on the altar.

"I haven't received any letters from Muggle since February of this year.

"I understand that a one-sided story lacks credibility, but if you carefully consider it, you should find some details that support this matter.

"I suspect that some force had influenced Muggle, causing her to refrain from seeking help from me for some reason. In fact, if she had written to me before the catastrophe completely unfolded, I could have arrived earlier than the official Beyonders. I might have been able to save Muggle and prevent the catastrophe.

"Often, letters and exchanges fail to inspire insights, making it difficult for us to engage in broader and more profound discussions. I will be in Trier in the coming days. If you are willing, we can arrange a time and place to meet and discuss your sister's encounter and the disaster in Cordu in detail. Perhaps, then, I can offer you useful suggestions."

Lumian pondered for a few seconds before recalling a detail from his dream.

Aurore had attempted to summon Hela's messenger but ultimately refrained from doing so. She was afraid of triggering a loop that would cause Cordu to restart frequently.

This likely meant that she had given up summoning Hela's messenger in reality or that she had tried but failed for some reason.

After realizing this, Lumian replied to Hela's suggestion, "No problem. We'll arrange a time and place when you arrive in Trier."

After sending the letter, concluding the ritual, and tidying up the altar, Lumian realized it was getting late. He quickly washed up, lay on the bed, and drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, Lumian awoke naturally to the resonating sound of the cathedral bell.

After visiting the washroom, he embarked on his usual morning jog along familiar streets like Rue Anarchie and Avenue du Marché, fully energizing his body.

During his routine, he discovered an empty space in the square outside église Saint-Robert and spent nearly an hour practicing combat techniques.

Returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian enjoyed a meatloaf breakfast while sipping a Whiskey Sour. On his way, he passed the Suhit steam locomotive station, where new vendors were already selling photos of street ma?tresse d'ateliers.

Lumian scanned the scene and caught sight of Baron Brignais.

The Savoie Mob leader, adorned with a diamond ring and smoking a mahogany pipe, appeared gentlemanly with his half top hat and the absence of any accompanying thugs.

Holding a seven- or eight-year-old child, he made his way from the steam locomotive station towards a carriage parked by the roadside.

The child donned a caramel coat with brass buttons, a black-and-white checkered shirt, and a linen coat. His black strapless leather shoes and white socks paired with a dark-red school bag that appeared somewhat heavy and solid.

With yellow hair, brown eyes, and a sturdy physique, the child had noticeable baby fat on his face and exuded an air of simplicity and honesty.

Baron Brignais's child? He usually resides in other provinces and visits Trier for summer vacations? No wonder they don't seem too familiar… Lumian muttered to himself, redirecting his gaze and continuing his stroll.

…

11 Rue des Fontaines, within Gardner Martin's grayish-white three-story villa.

Lumian arrived in the exclusive carriage of Salle de Bal Brise. He passed through the hall adorned with weapons and armor, arriving at a room filled with bookshelves.

Gardner Martin, displaying his amiable disposition, deep facial features, and brownish-red eyes, sat in an armchair at the back of the study. Standing before him were the short "Rat" Christo, with his gray-black hair, dark-blue eyes, and mustache, and the towering "Giant" Simon, measuring over 1.9 meters, his light-yellow hair closely cropped, clad in an unusually tight black suit.

Sensing Lumian's entrance into the study, "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo turned to regard their colleague.

“Giant” Simon’s eyes displayed caution and defiance as he instinctively raised his head.

He believed that Ciel, who had defeated “Hammer” Ait, shouldn’t be underestimated. However, he also believed that he himself was unquestionably stronger than that fool and might not lose to Ciel.

“Rat” Christo showed no evident emotions, but the right pocket of his dark brown shirt suddenly stirred, as if something alive resided within.

Christo slipped his right hand into his pocket, his expression abruptly changing.

His gaze upon Lumian grew intense with fear, and he couldn’t help but smile obsequiously.

Wh… Lumian felt a tad uneasy.

After pondering for a moment, he suspected that “Rat” Christo had used an item in his pocket to “see” that Lumian had advanced to Sequence 7 and become a Pyromaniac.

In contrast, “Giant” Simon clearly lacked such intuition, failing to notice the subtle shifts in his colleague.

“Good morning, Boss,” Lumian energetically greeted Gardner Martin.

A few days ago, he had informed the boss of the Savoie Mob that he had consumed the potion and advanced to Pyromaniac.

Gardner Martin nodded slightly, shifting his gaze from Lumian’s face to “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon.

After nearly ten seconds, he spoke in a low voice, “I have a mission for all of you. At precisely noon, retrieve something from Underground Trier and bring it to Rue des Fontaines.”

Mission? Lumian’s eyebrows twitched, sensing a potential trap.

As a new Beyonder to the Savoie Mob, trust between him and Gardner Martin was still lacking. Why would he be assigned such a crucial and confidential task?

With these thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian had two conjectures: either he was mere cannon fodder or this was a test.

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Chapter 271 - 271 Acting

271 Acting

With this in mind, Lumian's gaze automatically drifted over "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, taking them in.

He sensed that the chances of them becoming expendable pawns were slim. Potion-consuming Beyonders, unlike the Blessed relying on divine favors from evil gods, were a rarity. They couldn't be simply stockpiled at will. Firstly, the ingredients required were specific, and secondly, ample time was needed. At the Mid-Sequence, luck and mastery of the acting method played a role.

If he were to use them as mere pawns in this mission, the likelihood of reclaiming the Beyonder characteristics would be greatly diminished. It constituted a substantial portion of Gardner Martin's control over the underground world in the market district.

As a member of the secretive organization, the Iron and Blood Cross Order, Gardner Martin could indeed bear such a loss, but he wouldn't make such a colossal sacrifice for something insignificant.

And if the mission was of sufficient importance, sending only one Sequence 7 and two Sequence 8 Beyonders was clearly inadequate. Shouldn't Gardner Martin be concerned about failure?

With this realization, Lumian swiftly revised his conjecture.

Either this was a preliminary test, a low-risk mission designed to assess him, regardless of whether "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon were aware of it, or it was indeed a crucial and perilous operation. While using them as pawns, there would be powerhouses present as a safety net. This was also a test.

With this in mind, Lumian's initial reaction was to gaze at Gardner Martin and accept the mission, projecting an image of an ambitious young man striving to climb the ranks.

If it was the first possibility, this was his best chance to prove himself. If it was the second possibility, Lumian still had Mr. K's finger quietly nestled in his pocket as a trump card. When the time came, if he needed to divulge his affiliation with the Aurora Order to ensure his survival, he could abandon the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission.

As long as he remained alive, he could await another opportunity!

After the catastrophe caused by the Tree of Shadow, Lumian visited Psychic's headquarters and met Mr. K before Gardner Martin could conduct an investigation.

He concealed his experience with the Tree of Shadow, merely mentioning that something had occurred in the market district, trapping them in a peculiar wilderness. Then the brownish-green tree descended, and Susanna Mattise appeared, draining everyone's energy. To combat the Fallen Tree Spirit, he used the finger to fashion a robust defensive flesh robe, but he didn't receive additional assistance.

Later, with the aid of the tree's further descent, Susanna Mattise's weakened state, and the involvement of the other two present Beyonders, he barely overcame the enemy and vanquished her using his Pyromaniac abilities and the Fallen Mercury from Cordu.

He spoke the truth, albeit blurring the sequence of events, time, and location, as well as omitting a few details. The logic remained intact. Mr. K harbored no suspicions after hearing the account; instead, he sighed and cautioned Lumian not to overly rely on the finger since there were multiple ways to sever the mystical connection between him and it.

Satisfied with Lumian's advancement to Pyromaniac with Gardner Martin's assistance, Mr. K plucked another finger for him.

This led Lumian to believe that, as long as he didn't encounter extraordinary environments like Paramita or the Tree of Shadow and wasn't entangled in the perilous affair of confronting a godlike entity head-on, with Mr. K's finger, even if he couldn't completely reverse the situation, he still had a high chance of escape.

Just as Lumian was about to express his stance to the boss, he suddenly sensed that he shouldn't push his acting too far.

That was what Jenna would occasionally say.

According to Franca, Boss is at least a Sequence 6 Conspirer. I can't underestimate his intelligence and discernment…

My background is undeniably evident. I'm young and hail from the countryside. I was once entangled in a Beyonder catastrophe and lacked knowledge. I wanted to change my fate, but I've spent a considerable time in the market district, openly and covertly accomplishing much. Even with what the Boss only knows, it should be enough for him to perceive that I'm not an ignorant country bumpkin who acts rashly and mercilessly.

Based on today's incident, the impression the boss has of me should be someone capable of detecting mission abnormalities and potential dangers. Simply agreeing without reason or observation would only raise suspicions of ulterior motives or reliance on something.

That would be troublesome…

A whirlwind of thoughts raced through Lumian's mind. He immediately shifted his gaze to "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, eagerly awaiting their reactions and attitudes toward the mission.

It remained unclear whether "Rat" Christo was recalling the incident involving the "mirror person" or his brother's demise due to it. His expression grew nasty, tainted with fear and apprehension.

Doubt and wariness flickered across "Giant" Simon's face, yet he didn't voice any objections.

After a few seconds, they nearly spoke simultaneously.

"Yes, Boss!"

Observing this, Lumian deliberately hesitated before continuing, "Yes, Boss!"

With keen eyes, Gardner Martin observed Lumian, Christo, and Simon, assessing their expressions and demeanors.

After their unanimous agreement, the boss of the Savoie Mob grinned with satisfaction and said, "I shall now disclose the mission details."

He reached into a drawer and retrieved a scroll made of faux goatskin, laying it out on the desk before them.

Approaching, Lumian and his companions beheld a map revealing a section of Underground Trier!

The map measured a meter in length and 50 centimeters in width. The upper level depicted the Underground Trier, formed by the municipal department through the excavation of various tunnels and reinforcement of the quarry cave. It corresponded to the streets and squares above ground.

The map focused solely on the underground areas of Quartier du Marché, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, Quartier du Jardin Botanique, and Quartier de l'Observatoire. However, it was intricately detailed, as if copied from the original by infiltrating the municipal department.

Lumian could clearly discern extensions on both sides, although the drawing did not continue.

In the middle of the map lay quarry caves, ancient catacombs, and underground river tributaries, scattered in a haphazard manner and connected to the upper level through visible or concealed tunnels.

This portion contained numerous gaps and omissions. Beside these areas were inscriptions such as "to be investigated," "to be explored," and "to be searched."

The lower levels of the map encompassed collapsed mines and more missing information, as if veiled in a shroud of fog. Even the Iron and Blood Cross Order, a secret organization, lacked comprehensive knowledge.

Numerous passageways extended downward from this level, but the map did not indicate their connections.

Fourth Epoch Trier? The place referred to as the Ancient Ruins Reserve by the authorities?

It's evident that this map is a copy of a more comprehensive one…

A complete version includes Fourth Epoch Trier?

The Iron and Blood Cross Order possesses extensive knowledge of the underground… Lumian speculated as he committed the incomplete map to memory.

After his three subordinates had taken a cursory glance at the map, Gardner Martin pointed to a location and said, "This is your destination."

It marked a collapsed mine, yet there remained some open space.

Situated at the lowest level of the map, it was near Fourth Epoch Trier.

Above it, corresponding to Avenue Sèlbù, Rue des Mauvais Enfants, and Place de la Forêt, lay the intersection between Quartier de l'Observatoire and Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

"It's called the Albert Mines," Gardner Martin introduced. "To reach it, you must traverse two privately-bored tunnels. It remains unknown to the authorities and most people who travel underground."

As he spoke, Gardner Martin traced the tunnel with his finger and instructed Lumian, Christo, and Simon on the correct entrance.

Finally, he sighed with a tinge of emotion and added, "Six years ago, Albert Goncourt, the leader of the rebellion and the mastermind behind the uprising, relied on this mine, which he discovered and named, to elude the army, police, and official Beyonders who were searching the underground. He survived."

Six years ago… Rebellion… Uprising… Lumian instantly recalled what he had witnessed and heard.

During the war with the Loen Kingdom, prices in Trier skyrocketed, leaving people in despair due to the exorbitant cost of food. This triggered a massive protest that swept through the city, resulting in various conflicts.

From Gardner Martin's words, it was evident that the protest wasn't purely spontaneous. Someone had planned and guided it. Was the Iron and Blood Cross

Order also involved? Lumian continued to gaze at the map, lost in thought.

Concluding his explanation, Gardner Martin said, “Your task is to reach the Albert Mines before noon and await the arrival of a trader who will hand you a box.

“You need not give him anything, nor do you need to communicate with him verbally.

“On your return journey, you must not open that box, as doing so would expose you to immeasurable danger.

“As long as you strictly follow my instructions, the mission poses minimal risk. While you may encounter peculiar phenomena concealed underground or face Beyonder monsters, good teamwork will resolve those challenges.”

After providing them with additional guidance, Lumian, Christo, and Simon each took a carbide lamp and departed from 11 Rue des Fontaines, making their way to the nearest entrance to Underground Trier.

Casting a final glance at the now-out-of-sight grayish-white villa, Lumian considered the impression Gardner Martin had of him.

With a smile, he casually inquired of “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon, “Have you undertaken similar missions before?”

“Rat” Christo fell silent for a few seconds before answering, “Thrice.”

“Once,” “Giant” Simon replied in a slightly buzzing voice.

Lumian chuckled.

“Well, the fact that you’re still alive suggests that such missions aren’t too perilous.”

“Rat” Christo remained silent, as though he had fallen into a grim recollection. “Giant” Simon reassured himself, echoing Lumian’s words.

“You’re right. Perhaps this is a test from the boss. Those who pass may have an opportunity to advance further.”

Lumian smiled.

“And what about those who fail? Do they perish on the spot?”

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Chapter 272 - 272 Charismatic Artist

272 Charismatic Artist

“Giant” Simon found himself momentarily speechless, struggling to find the right words. After a few seconds of contemplation, he finally spoke up.

“Are you out of your mind? If you fail, the worst outcome would be missing an opportunity.”

“Rat” Christo chimed in.

“If the mission is truly important, the Boss wouldn’t hesitate to handle it personally. He wouldn’t send us. And if it’s not a significant task, the risk won’t be too high.”

This train of thought mirrored Lumian’s initial concerns.

Lumian glanced towards the nearby entrance of Underground Trier, intentionally wearing a smile.

“Perhaps we are merely bait in this scenario?

“For instance, the Boss suspects that a faction is secretly watching us, so he has deliberately devised this mission. If everything goes smoothly without any abnormalities, he can deactivate the alarm and consider it a test. However, if he does catch something, he can follow the trail of clues to uncover the truth and eliminate any hidden dangers. As for us being the bait and potentially getting caught, it’s not his concern. As long as we ultimately achieve his goal, losing a few Low-Sequence Beyonders falls within his level of tolerance.”

“Rat” Christo’s face turned pale upon hearing these words, while “Giant” Simon fell into silence.

Although they lacked experience with mysticism, their years as mobsters and leaders had honed their basic analytical skills.

They couldn’t help but admit that Ciel’s theory made sense.

This, naturally, brought about a deep sense of fear for their lives.

Especially for Christo, memories of his brother Erkin’s death and the pained expressions of his wife and children flooded his mind.

If it weren't for the Boss assigning him another task and excluding him from the smuggling operation, he might have been replaced by the so-called "mirror people" and met a tragic end somewhere underground.

And as for his wife, his dogs, and the other animals he cared for, the "mirror person" would have had the opportunity to enjoy them for a while!

With these thoughts weighing on their minds, the three of them ignited their carbide lamps and descended the steel stairs in silence.

Christo scanned the dark tunnel with the bluish-yellow light, his voice trembling as he spoke.

"The Boss wouldn't purposefully send us to our deaths.

"Even as Low-Sequence Beyonders, we still have our uses. If we perish underground, it might take the Boss half a year or even a whole year to groom a replacement."

The "mirror people" incident came to his mind, the Boss's request for him to undertake a different task being a clear attempt to protect him without revealing anything.

"Everything comes at a price. Perhaps the stakes involved this time are more valuable than the three of us combined." Lumian held the carbide lamp emitting a yellowish glow, walking steadily through the dark and slightly damp passageway. He sneered and said, "I hope this mission won't be as perilous as the Boss claims, but we can't afford to be naive. We must prepare for the worst."

Noting Ciel's significant improvement, Christo couldn't help but ask, "What should we do?"

From his perspective, Ciel was the most reliable person in this mission—a lifeline in critical moments.

Surprised by Christo's sudden timidity, "Giant" Simon turned towards him.

When did the "Rat" become so fearful?

As a leader under the Boss, why would he choose to display weakness and worry in front of Ciel?

Where is his pride and self-esteem? Wasn't he afraid that Ciel would overshadow him and encroach upon his smuggling business?

This was precisely the effect Lumian intended. He genuinely spoke up.

"The Boss has helped me multiple times, and I'm more than willing to carry out missions for him. However, the risk involved should not be excessively high, leaving us with only the option of 'death.' Damn it, I haven't lived long enough!

“That’s why my stance is to attempt the mission if possible. If it becomes too dangerous, I won’t hesitate to abandon it and ensure my own survival. This might require the three of us to let down our guard against each other and cooperate fully to overcome any hidden threats.”

Such an attitude struck a chord with Christo and Simon, prompting visible or imperceptible nods from them.

No one was entirely selfless. Taking a calculated risk for the Boss was already a testament to their loyalty!

Accepting this attitude and genuinely cooperating to resist danger seemed to be the only viable choice, at least on the surface.

“How should we collaborate?” Christo swiftly made up his mind.

He didn’t want another “mirror people” incident.

Lumian smirked once more.

“First and foremost, we must understand each other’s abilities so that we can complement one another more effectively.”

Christo pondered for a moment before speaking up, “I’m a Beast Tamer, a Sequence 8 of the Apothecary pathway. I can directly confront and communicate with various beasts to a certain extent. I have the ability to gradually tame them and make them my assistants.

“I’m also skilled in treating illnesses and providing comprehensive medical care…”

At that moment, he couldn’t help but cast a questioning glance at Ciel, as if hinting at his need for a remedy to improve his performance in bed and replenish his physical stamina.

Word had gotten around about Ciel being quite a libertine. Not only was he involved with Jenna, “Red Boots’” mistress, but he had also been linked to nearly ten dancers. He had arranged for them to receive acting lessons at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, allowing them to earn money without having to accompany customers.

An Apothecary? If only I had known that “Rat” Christo was an Apothecary, I would’ve gotten him to give plenty of medicine to Jenna’s mother… She would’ve made a quick recovery and returned home that very night… Lumian silently sighed and nodded approvingly in the flickering light of the carbide lamp.

The more “Giant” Simon listened, the more astonished he became.

He began to suspect that “Rat” Christo had lost his mind by divulging the secrets of his Sequence!

Until now, apart from Gardner Martin, nobody knew Christo's Sequence or the pathway he belonged to. After all, there were plenty of people in Trier who had a fondness for pets—some even had a large number of them or formed intimate relationships with animals, as occasionally seen in the newspapers.

In a flash, an idea struck Simon.

"Rat" Christo was in charge of the smuggling business and had completed most of the Boss's secret missions. Perhaps he knew something and had become pessimistic about this operation, hence his sincere cooperation with Ciel.

Christo let out a sigh and continued, "I've been unlucky. I haven't managed to tame a genuine Beyonder creature yet. Otherwise, I wouldn't be powerless against Mid-Sequence Beyonders even if I encountered them.

"This mission was sudden and we didn't have time to prepare. I only brought a few companions with me. Is he afraid that we won't die quickly enough?"

As he spoke, he raised his right hand.

A colorful snake-like creature with a triangular head emerged from his sleeve.

Soon after, Christo had the snake retreat back into his sleeve. He reached into his pocket and produced a palm-sized rat.

This rat was different from the ordinary kind. Its fur was pale white and distinct, with eyes as bright as rubies.

"This is Taffy. It's a unique creature I discovered underground during my smuggling days. It can't be used as the main ingredient for any potion, but it has the ability to sense hidden dangers," Christo briefly introduced.

"It can also sense the approximate strength of others, right?" Lumian asked thoughtfully.

Christo looked at Lumian with surprise and hesitated for a moment before replying, "Yes."

Recognizing that Christo had already divulged enough information, Lumian didn't press further, despite suspecting that he possessed other abilities or other animal companions. Instead, he shifted his gaze to "Giant" Simon.

Simon hesitated for a moment, recalling his earlier speculation. In a muffled voice, he said, "I'm a Sequence 8 Pugilist of the Warrior pathway. Like 'Hammer' Ait, I excel in face-to-face combat and various fighting techniques. I carry a gun, a dagger, a bayonet, and boxing gloves."

His explanation was brief, as Pugilists didn't possess any extraordinary abilities.

No mystical item? That's true. It's indeed challenging for mobsters groomed by secret organizations to acquire such items… Lumian chuckled to himself.

"You're stronger than 'Hammer' Ait because you're intelligent and can read the situation clearly."

These words left Simon unsure whether to feel angered or proud.

Holding the carbide lamp, he looked at Lumian and said, "What about you? Which Sequence 8 pathway are you from? Hunter?"

Since they were working together, Ciel couldn't keep his Sequence a secret!

Lumian smiled, raising his right hand in front of him.

Silently, a crimson flame emerged from his palm and hung in the air, burning silently.

"You're a Pyromaniac?" Simon exclaimed in surprise.

Among Trier's mystical circles, the most common information concerned Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Hunter pathway, especially those below Sequence 6.

Lumian didn't respond, opting to maintain his smile instead.

Simon suddenly understood why "Rat" Christo's attitude towards Ciel had undergone such a drastic change and why he appeared to seek his assistance.

Sequence 7 was the starting point for Mid-Sequence Beyonders. Compared to Low-Sequence Beyonders like themselves, their strength had undergone a qualitative transformation. They were countless times more powerful!

With his attention now diverted from the pocket of "Rat" Christo, Simon asked Lumian in surprise and suspicion, "Does the Boss know that you've advanced to Sequence 7?"

"The Boss provided me with the necessary supplementary ingredients," Lumian truthfully replied, dissipating the crimson flame in his palm under the yellowish glow of the lamp.

Wha… Simon's pupils dilated.

Lumian looked around and continued, "That's why, if I can complete this mission, I will do everything in my power to see it through."

With those words, he pulled out an iron-colored canister and tossed it to Simon.

"This is Scorpion Poison that I obtained from 'Hammer' Ait. You can apply it to your weapon.

“Increasing your strength will increase our chances of survival.”

Simon caught the canister, momentarily taken aback.

Though Ciel disgusted him and they were at odds, his knowledge, intelligence, strength, and approach to things made him seem reliable. Unconsciously, he found himself listening to him and following his lead.

Lumian, who was walking ahead without turning back, let out a sigh of relief.

He had exaggerated the risks and instilled fear to dampen the spirits of “Rat” Christo and Simon, plunging them into a state of worry. Then, by revealing his own strength, offering convincing suggestions, and providing small favors, he would establish himself as the team’s leader.

Only then could he fully harness the team’s combined strength without exposing his hidden trump cards and effectively combat any potential threats.

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Chapter 273 - 273 Trader

273 Trader

Holding the carbide lamp aloft, “Giant” Simon trailed behind Lumian for a few steps, his keen eyes picking up on the inconsistencies in Lumian’s words.

“Ciel, the Boss knows you’ve turned into a Pyromaniac. He won’t just toss you aside recklessly, will he?”

Lumian gazed ahead at the tunnel bathed in the yellowish glow, a smile playing on his lips as he posed a question without turning around.

“How long have I been with the Savoie Mob?”

Both “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo had a moment of enlightenment and found themselves in agreement with Lumian’s explanation.

It was true that Lumian, a Beyonder with a dubious past who had recently joined the mob, had brought with him a crucial ingredient for a potion. Such a person couldn’t be trusted right off the bat. They had to undergo a series of tests in the form of missions.

And if Lumian were to meet his demise during one of these missions, it would simply be chalked up to his ill luck. Losing a foreign Beyonder was far less painful for the Boss than losing a subordinate he had meticulously groomed.

The two leaders of the Savoie Mob hesitated no longer. They cautiously followed Lumian, maintaining a distance of two to three steps. It was a familiar arrangement, much like when they traveled with a few mobsters stationed at similar positions behind them.

In the midst of their journey, “Giant” Simon donned gloves and applied a small amount of Scorpion Poison to his dagger, bayonet, and boxing gloves. He then returned the canister to Lumian.

The trio descended into the tunnel marked on the map. Despite their soft steps, the special environment caused their footfalls to echo faintly in the dark, eerily silent underground.

Nearly 45 minutes later, they passed through the area marked as an ancient tomb and arrived at the entrance of a concealed passageway.

It led to an abandoned quarry cave that had lain dormant for ages. The ground was uneven, covered in moss. In the distance, the sound of an underground river could

be heard, occasionally accompanied by the rumbling of a steam subway passing by.

Lumian observed for a moment, clenching the ring of the carbide lamp between his teeth. With both hands, he grasped a protruding stone wall and climbed to the cave's summit.

Then, extending his right hand, he pushed an apparently ordinary stone behind him, wedging it between the side wall and the cave roof.

A pitch-black hole materialized, allowing someone as tall as Simon to bend over and crawl through.

The hidden tunnel had been fashioned using a long-forgotten ventilation system that already existed in a nearby quarry.

The three of them hunched over and strode deeper into the underground tunnel. Gradually, the sounds of the underground river and the steam subway faded away.

Apart from their own breathing and footsteps, the surroundings were silent as a tomb.

After nearly half an hour, Lumian and his companions followed the markings on the map and leaped from an exit, emerging into an already existing underground cave.

From high above, stalactites dangled like the menacing teeth of a terrifying beast lurking in the darkness.

Lumian didn't rush to enter another hidden tunnel at the cave's base. Instead, he turned to "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, who had accumulated a fair amount of dust on their heads. Wearing a grave expression, he spoke.

"Before we proceed, let's confirm something to avoid any mishaps. We won't have time for verbal communication."

"Alright." Both "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon accepted Lumian's words without question.

With a subtle nod, Lumian replied, "Firstly, from the moment we enter the second tunnel until we return here, no one is allowed to speak. Make use of physical gestures as much as possible. If that's not feasible, you must obtain my permission before uttering a word."

This precautionary measure stemmed from Gardner Martin's advice regarding the lack of need for communication with the trader. Lumian had expanded its scope and made it absolute to prevent any potential mishaps.

Christo and Simon recalled the Boss's counsel and nodded in agreement.

Observing their response, Lumian pressed on, “Secondly, no matter what anomalies occur, unless something attacks both of you, stay calm and act in accordance with my lead.

“Thirdly, I won’t force you, but if you wish to survive, it’s best to heed my instructions.”

These two requests were met with resistance from “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon. They would be entrusting their safety to Lumian’s intelligence, skills, reactions, and knowledge. It was a departure from their usual reliance on their own wild Beyonder instincts.

After a few seconds of hesitation, “Rat” Christo forced a smile, recollecting Ciel’s strength and previous performances.

“I’ll follow your arrangements, but if you fail to react in time and Taffy warns me of danger, I’ll take matters into my own hands.

“Dammit, the longer I’ve been in this smuggling business, the more I dread Trier’s underground.”

“Giant” Simon chimed in, “I’m with you on that, ‘Rat.’”

Lumian felt a sense of satisfaction, having successfully “tamed” the two Beyonders who also served as leaders in the Savoie Mob. He didn’t push further and simply nodded in agreement.

“No problem.

“Fourthly, I will be the one to make contact with the trader later and retrieve the box the Boss desires.”

Upon hearing this, “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon looked at Lumian as if they were seeing Ciel in a new light.

They had expected the Pyromaniac to leverage his strength and authority to assign one of them to interact with the trader and handle the riskiest part of the mission. Alternatively, they thought Lumian might suggest drawing lots to determine who would handle the task. To their surprise, Lumian volunteered to take on the responsibility himself.

Ciel is quite fair… “Giant” Simon couldn’t help but sigh.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to do the same if he were in Lumian’s position.

This realization made both “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon less resistant to following Lumian’s instructions.

Though the lighting was dim, Lumian managed to observe his two colleagues’ reactions.

He couldn’t help but sneer inwardly.

If it weren’t for the fact that you two Beyonders lack mystical knowledge and might cause trouble during the box exchange, I wouldn’t be taking such a risk myself.

Lumian sighed from the depths of his heart. Sometimes, weakness could be an advantage.

Emphasizing that they were to maintain silence, Lumian picked up the carbide lamp and made his way to the bottom of the cave. He gestured for “Giant” Simon to embrace a rock about half his height and move it aside.

The rock was incredibly heavy, posing a challenge even for Simon’s strength. It took him some time to shift it, revealing the deep entrance to the hidden tunnel.

The tunnel wasn’t particularly long, and it took them only seven to eight minutes to crouch down and make their way through. They arrived at a mineral cave that had suffered significant collapse, leaving only a limited space.

This was their destination—the Albert Mines.

Lumian surveyed the cluttered gray-black stones and turned to “Giant” Simon, who was dressed in a black formal suit. He pointed at his chest.

Understanding the unspoken request, Simon produced an iron-gray pocket watch and opened it with a snap.

The dial revealed numerous tightly clenched gears, exuding a sophisticated yet cold mechanical beauty.

“Giant” Simon held up his pocket watch, showing it to Lumian and “Rat” Christo, indicating that there were still over ten minutes until the designated time of the transaction—noon.

Lumian nodded and remained silent, patiently awaiting the appointed hour.

After a while, he subtly turned his head, listening intently for any signs of movement around them.

He sensed an unusual sound emanating from underground, as if a multitude of people were screaming, roaring, and fighting.

Beneath the illumination of the carbide lamp, Lumian glanced at Simon and Christo, noticing their similar reactions, as if they too had caught wind of the commotion.

Observing Simon and Christo’s gazes fixed on him, Lumian lowered his right hand, signaling them to refrain from being affected.

Intermittently, they could hear peculiar movements. The three of them stood at the edge of the Albert Mines, silently waiting.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoed from the other side of the mine, as if someone in leather shoes was approaching from an unusually quiet tunnel dozens of meters away.

Is that the trader? Lumian mused, casting his thoughtful gaze in that direction.

The footsteps paused and then resumed, resonating through the Albert Mines.

When they were merely a few meters away from the entrance, they mysteriously ceased altogether.

After a brief wait, Lumian and his companions spotted a figure emerging from the opposite mine entrance. It was a man over 1.8 meters tall, donning a white shirt, yellow vest, black formal suit, and dark pants. He clutched a small brown leather suitcase in his hand.

The man wore a silk top hat pulled low, casting a shadow over his face. However, Lumian's Hunter eyesight allowed him to discern the man's appearance with the aid of the three carbide lamps.

The man had short auburn hair, brownish-red eyes, slightly unkempt and thick beard, and thick eyebrows. He resembled a starved male bear, exaggeratedly thin.

The collar of his shirt was tightly fastened, as if he dreaded the cold.

Lumian held the carbide lamp and was about to approach the man.

But then, Christo tugged at his arm.

When Lumian turned his head, Christo anxiously and fearfully pointed at his right pocket.

Does this mean that Taffy, the peculiar rat, has issued a warning of danger? But judging from Christo's behavior, the threat hasn't materialized yet and is still manageable. Otherwise, he would have already turned and fled… Lumian interpreted the signs and nodded at Christo, indicating that he would proceed with caution.

Christo didn't stop him. He watched Lumian with concern as he advanced toward the trader.

As he closed the distance, Lumian's gaze carefully assessed the man's physique, analyzing every detail.

His clothes are slightly oversized, as though they don't quite fit him… He seems fearful of something, yet his eyes hold anger and hatred… His hands don't extend beyond his sleeves, and they're concealed within, including the handle of the

suitcase… His feet…

Lumian's pupils dilated as he noticed that the trader wasn't wearing shoes but rather a pair of gray socks.

This contradicted the sound of leather shoes they had just heard!

Could it be that the footsteps didn't belong to him but someone else? Lumian grew increasingly vigilant.

With limited space remaining in the Albert Mines, he swiftly arrived in front of the trader.

The man, resembling a starved bear, chuckled and inquired with a hint of amusement, "Did Gardner Martin send you?

"Was he scared out of his wits after receiving a message from his companion, who went underground to search for the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier, months after disappearing, claiming to possess an important item to deliver to him."

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Chapter 274 - 274 Escape

274 Escape

The entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier? The Iron and Blood Cross Order is hunting for it? This person reappeared after vanishing for months? Lumian's mind raced upon hearing the trader's words.

He kept in mind the warning not to speak and tried his best not to. Leaning forward slightly, he extended his right hand to receive the small brown leather suitcase.

The man, resembling a starved bear, didn't refuse and chuckled.

"If I were Gardner Martin, I'd pray I never find out what's in this box."

What does this mean? Lumian wondered as his palm touched the suitcase.

At that moment, his eyes narrowed as he noticed the trader's right palm was absent from the suitcase's handle, floating as if held by an invisible force.

Following the handle, Lumian saw there was no arm in the sleeve. It was empty, supported by something invisible!

No arm! His heart tightened as he glanced up at the trader. His brownish-red eyes, accentuated by his thick beard and eyebrows, were as cold as a wild beast's, filled with undisguised hatred and fear.

Various thoughts raced through Lumian's mind as he forced himself to control his reaction. He calmly took the suitcase, not inquiring or observing. He didn't instinctively defend or attack, as if he hadn't noticed anything.

The trader's emotions seemed to shift slightly, and his laughter carried a hint of sorrow.

"Tell Gardner Martin that it won't be long before he goes underground too!

"All the pain and torture I've endured, he too will experience them!"

Lumian didn't say a word. He picked up the small suitcase and was about to turn around and leave the Albert Mines with "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the other entrance behind the trader.

Compared to earlier, it became much clearer, almost within arm's reach.

Lumian felt more certain now; he could hear the distinct sound of leather shoes approaching from the silent tunnel!

In an instant, a figure emerged before Lumian, Christo, and Simon.

It was a man, completely naked, his head missing, blood oozing from the neck wound.

He wore only dark-blue shorts and strapless black leather shoes.

With two swift steps, the headless monster reached the trader from behind, stretching out its hands, seizing his head, and yanking it upwards.

“Save me! Save me!” cried the trader, unable to hide his panic and fear.

Almost simultaneously, his entire head was lifted, exposing a blood-stained spine dangling below. The spine was unusually long, swaying gently like a tail.

Silently, the trader’s shirt, vest, pants, and formal attire lost support and collapsed to the ground.

He had no body left, only his head connected to the bloody spine.

“Save me! Save me!” The trader struggled with all his might, but the headless monster held him tightly, seemingly attempting to stuff him into its empty neck.

Although Lumian had encountered many terrifying and warped creatures in Cordu, this was the first time he had come across something so bizarre and terrifying.

Without hesitation, he turned around and dashed towards the entrance of the hidden tunnel, ignoring the trader’s pleas for help.

“Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo, who had been frightened from the very start, finally lost control. Like cyclists hearing the starting signal, they bent down and hurried into the tunnel.

Lumian caught up with them in a few strides, the echoing voice of the Albert Mines haunting their trail.

“Save me! Save me!”

“If I die, you guys can forget about living!”

“Help!”

With their carbide lamps in hand, the trio silently made their way through the hidden tunnel, their hearts constricting at the screams left behind.

A few minutes passed, and the shrill cries suddenly ceased, leaving an eerie silence that enveloped the Albert Mines.

Then, the echoing sound of tapping leather shoes reverberated through the hidden tunnel.

“Rat” Christo, being the shortest, found it easiest to keep his back bent as he moved forward. In a state of fear, he frantically pointed at his pocket with his right hand, as if he had seen death itself.

Has that peculiar rat given us a perilous warning? Lumian glanced at Christo’s left chest and nodded reassuringly, indicating that he would cover their rear. All they needed to do was run with all their might.

As the tapping sounds drew nearer, Lumian and the others grew tense.

Though they had to bend their backs to navigate the concealed tunnel, it only slightly reduced their escape speed. After all, they were skilled Beyonders, their physical abilities notably enhanced.

With each passing moment, Lumian felt a chill down his spine. Just as the sound of the leather shoes approached to within a few meters, the trio finally reached the tunnel exit and burrowed out.

Seeing “Giant” Simon about to flee on his own, Lumian, who had already returned to their agreed position, could no longer stay silent. He lowered his voice and growled, “Block the door!”

As he spoke, he turned around and abandoned the carbide lamp and small suitcase, attempting to push the heavy rock beside the exit.

“Giant” Simon subconsciously ignored Lumian’s command, but his heart still trembled from the low shout.

Throughout their journey, he had grown accustomed to following his instructions, as if it were the only way to ensure his survival.

He found himself caught in a dilemma.

After a brief moment of hesitation, “Giant” Simon suspected that if he ran away and left Ciel to fend for himself against the monster, Ciel might very well attack him and kill him as a deserter once he survived the attack!

“Rat” Christo had similar thoughts, but he believed that if they both didn’t help, Ciel wouldn’t waste time blocking the tunnel exit. When the time came, whoever ran the slowest would become the monster’s first target, buying enough time for the other two to escape.

After evaluating each other’s pathway characteristics and Sequences, Christo realized he was definitely the slowest. Moreover, he couldn’t injure “Giant” Simon

and “Lion” Ciel in a short period of time, meaning he couldn’t slow them down and overtake them.

Without hesitation, he stopped fleeing and returned to the tunnel exit, assisting Lumian in pushing the stone to block the door.

Taking a cue from the “Rat,” “Giant” Simon chose to obey and turned around.

Together, in just a few seconds, the trio secured the entrance to the hidden tunnel.

The sound of footsteps faded into nothingness.

Simultaneously, “Rat” Christo couldn’t contain his surprise and delight, exclaiming, “Everything’s fine now!”

There was no more visible movement in his pocket, where the rat named Taffy resided.

Lumian didn’t share Christo’s exuberance. He picked up the carbide lamp and small suitcase, speaking in a deep voice, “Let’s talk when we get back to the first underground level.”

“Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo’s relaxed minds tensed up once more. Instinctively, they followed Lumian up the rock wall and turned into another hidden tunnel.

Along the way, they didn’t encounter any attacks, but being underground meant they were surrounded by either complete silence or occasional strange sounds. After their recent fright, the environment was far from pleasant for them. If Lumian hadn’t remained calm and composed, “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo might have resorted to drastic measures.

Upon returning to the area corresponding to the streets and squares above ground, “Rat” Christo reached into his pocket to comfort Taffy and let out a long sigh.

“When I saw that monster, I thought we were going to die right there.”

Though he and Simon had killed over ten people, interacted with other Beyonders, and even fought them, they had never encountered a monster like the headless one before. It was an abnormal horror they had never experienced.

This was even scarier than the horror stories they had heard in their youth!

Lumian smiled.

“Didn’t the Boss say that there won’t be much risk if we don’t communicate or open the box?”

However, in such a situation, most people couldn’t stay calm! “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo gained a newfound appreciation for Ciel’s mental fortitude.

Thanks to the shock brought about by the trader and the headless monster, Lumian and his companions weren't interested in what lay inside the box. They hurriedly left the underground and returned to 11 Rue des Fontaines, where they met Gardner Martin in the study.

Gardner Martin took the small suitcase and examined it casually. He smiled and said, "Very good. You've all done well. I'll reward you later."

After praising them, the Savoie Mob boss looked at Lumian and nodded gently.

"I have a message for you. If you wish to progress further on the Hunter pathway, you must remember this sentence:

'The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's.'"

The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's… Lumian couldn't fully grasp the true meaning of this sentence, but Gardner Martin didn't provide further explanation.

As his three subordinates left the study, Gardner Martin turned to the door connecting to the activity room.

The door creaked open, and a man in a half top hat, white shirt, yellow vest, black suit, and dark pants approached.

He had short auburn hair, brownish-red eyes, a thick, messy beard, and thick eyebrows, resembling a starving bear. He was the trader who had given the small suitcase to Lumian and the others and been dragged back by the headless monster.

"Olson, any thoughts on him?" Gardner Martin inquired.

The trader addressed as Olson replied with a smile, "Simple background, clear origins, smart, bold, and decisive. He could bring together a few people who were originally unrelated into a team in a short period of time. Isn't that what you want?

"As for loyalty, that's the least of my worries. When the time comes, even if he's not loyal, he'll become loyal."

Gardner Martin nodded slightly.

"Observe him for a while longer and see who he interacts with."

After discussing this topic, Gardner Martin looked at the small suitcase on the table and asked curiously, "What's inside?"

"Like I said, you'd better pray you never find out." The trader known as Olson smiled, picked up the suitcase, and left the study.

After taking a few steps in the hall, he suddenly found his head a little tilted. He raised his hands, held his head, and straightened it with a snap.

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Chapter 275 - 275 Poaching

275 Poaching

In the carriage heading back to the market district, Lumian stared out the window, reflecting on Gardner Martin's actions after completing the mission.

He felt that the Savoie Mob's boss didn't seem too concerned about the suitcase they risked their lives for. The boss merely glanced at it casually and placed it on the desk.

Was it really some kind of test? The Iron and Blood Cross Order possesses information about the spine-dangling head and headless monster. As long as I stick to the prescribed procedure and don't act independently, they won't really come after me?

But the Boss used to be a Conspirer. Perhaps he just wanted us to see the suitcase, but it might not reveal his true intentions…

Regardless, the head-only trader and the headless humanoid monster are real. What do they symbolize? Can I trust the words of the former? He disappeared for months searching for the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier and experienced terrifying events. His head and body got separated, and both gained consciousness?

When Boss said, "The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's," it felt like he was warning me not to trust others easily… Did he mention this because he was satisfied with my performance on the mission?

Has he sent someone to secretly follow and observe us in detail? Or maybe "Giant" Simon or "Rat" Christo are not as scared as they seem and one of them is secretly working as a spy for the Boss?

Since the Boss didn't keep me here, the "audit" isn't over yet. Could someone be tailing this carriage and lurking in the shadows?

Heh heh, Mr. K and his subordinates love doing this too. It'd be amusing if they ran into each other…

In the carriage, "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, who were using the Salle de Bal Brise's carriage to return to the market district, grew a bit uneasy as Lumian remained silent and gazed out of the window.

After five minutes of indescribable silence, Christo forced a smile and asked, "Ciel, what are you looking at?"

“It’s too cramped,” Lumian sighed, disregarding the question.

Christo and Simon exchanged glances, thinking that Ciel might be mocking them for taking up space in the carriage.

After hesitating for a moment, Christo decided to share his intentions.

He lowered his voice and said, “Ciel, I want to use this opportunity to talk to you. Damn it, I didn’t expect Simon to join us!”

“Son of a sow. I was the one who suggested borrowing the carriage in the first place!” “Giant” Simon retorted.

Ignoring him, Christo continued, “Ciel, this mission has allowed me to reacquaint myself with you. Apart from Boss, you are the most intelligent, powerful, and calmest Beyonder around me.”

The calmest? You haven’t seen me when I’m impulsive… Lumian teased, deliberately provoking.

“Is that so? Am I more intelligent than Brignais and stronger than Franca?”

“Rat” Christo was at a loss for words. After a few seconds, he said, “Uh, well… what I mean is, in the future, when the Boss assigns me secret missions, I want your help to analyze and figure out what to do. I don’t want to be flustered when facing a similar monster next time.”

Oh, intel has come knocking on my door? Lumian smiled and replied, “I don’t mind helping, but aren’t you afraid the Boss will be angry if he finds out?”

Christo glanced at Lumian, then at “Giant” Simon beside him, and his tone turned cold.

“If you keep quiet, and we keep quiet, the Boss won’t find out.”

Simon’s eyelids twitched, and he added, “My thoughts align with Rat’s.”

He didn’t want to die on the next secret mission either.

Lumian pondered for a moment and grinned.

“Alright, I can assist, but I can’t guarantee I’ll uncover the truth or find a way to avoid danger based solely on your descriptions. Also, I might make some small requests.”

“No problem!” “Rat” Christo agreed without hesitation.

Today’s encounter alone wouldn’t have pushed him to this state. He had just escaped the mirror people incident, and his nerves were on edge.

“Giant” Simon also expressed his agreement. Then, he looked at Lumian and cursed himself softly,

He cleared his throat and said, “Ciel, my Big Bro, I apologize. I wasn’t too friendly before, and I even encouraged you to deal with ‘Red Boots’ when you were new to the Savoie Mob and knew little about us.

“I’m a rough and unrefined guy. I can’t say pleasant words, but I hope you can accept my apology. In the future, I, Simon, will follow your lead!”

Wow, you’ve grasped the situation so quickly, and you’re so humble… This fellow is quite a talent… Lumian pretended to be nonchalant and replied, “I’ve already forgotten about the past. Besides, have I targeted you or sought revenge recently?”

With that said, Lumian added inwardly, Well, it’s mostly because I’m too busy to bother with a mere mob leader like you…

Simon breathed a sigh of relief, convinced that Ciel wasn’t too petty.

Lumian smiled and questioned, “Why do you call me Big Bro? I’m much younger than you.”

Simon smiled sheepishly.

“You’re already a Sequence 7. In terms of strength, I should call you Big Bro.”

Lumian couldn’t help but jest, “If you stick to addressing someone by their Sequence, will you have to call me ‘Uncle’ once I reach Sequence 6?”

Simon hesitated for a moment before clearing his throat.

“If you wish…”

Damn it, isn’t this guy too shameless? Is he like this even when talking to the Boss privately? “Rat” Christo turned his head in surprise and looked at the burly man, who stood more than 1.9 meters tall, as though this was the first time he had met this giant.

Simon continued, “But I believe I’ll reach Sequence 7 before you hit Sequence 6.

“You must have just become a Pyromaniac. It might take years, even decades, to fully master the power of flames and withstand the next potion.”

He was implying: “Haha, I was just joking. Perhaps we’ll both be Sequence 7s soon, and you’ll still be my Big Bro.”

Upon hearing this, Lumian’s mind wandered back to the moment he had used invisible flames to burn Susanna Mattise to death, feeling the potion digesting a little inside him.

However, he couldn't be sure as he hadn't yet completed the first acting principle, making the degree of digestion unclear.

Combining past experiences and recent events in the market district, Lumian sensed that the first acting principle was close to being revealed, but it always fell short. His thoughts lacked clarity, and he had a feeling that he needed to wait for the right opportunity.

His mind then shifted to Gardner Martin's possible covert observations and subsequent tests.

As a result, Lumian decided to postpone his plans to attend Mr. Fool's bishop's preaching at Lavigny Dock in the square district the day after tomorrow. He felt it would be better to wait until he passed the test and officially joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

But what about my psychiatric treatment scheduled for tomorrow afternoon? Should I still go?

I believe my mental state and emotional control have improved over the past few days, but I'll need the two ladies to confirm it. Yes, they always use Psychological Invisibility. Madam Justice is a true demigod, so it's unlikely for Gardner Martin or his subordinates to see her. As a Hunter, it's normal for me to have an interest in studying plants. After visiting the botanical garden, I'll have a coffee and take a break. No one can accuse me of anything… Lumian made a quick decision to continue the psychiatric treatment the next day.

However, before heading to Mason's café, he planned to spend two to three hours exploring the nearby botanical garden.

Once the carriage stopped at Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian went upstairs to enjoy a cup of coffee while watching "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo leave Avenue du Marché.

Around 4 p.m., he put on a dark wide-brimmed round hat and left the dance hall. His destination was Franca's place at Rue des Blouses Blanches to discuss the peculiar mission and Gardner Martin's behavior in the afternoon.

As Lumian strolled along Avenue du Marché, a sudden thought struck him.

If Boss is indeed sending someone to watch my actions during this period, he might think I'm having an affair with Franca if I frequent her apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

But maybe, as a Trierien, he wouldn't mind?

Right, there's already a rumor about me having an affair with Jenna. I'm going to Rue des Blouses Blanches to find Jenna, not Franca. He won't be suspicious…

Lumian calmed himself and arrived at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. He knocked on the door of Room 601.

Franca, who was wearing her usual blouse and light-colored pants, snapped, “Why are you here again?”

At that moment, Lumian noticed peculiar drawings on her face—a turd on the left side and a dark green turtle on the right.

“Lost at cards?” Lumian raised an eyebrow.

Franca had mentioned playing cards with Jenna and her dancers, involving strange punishments without money being at stake.

Franca glanced back and lowered her voice, “Jenna has been in a bad mood lately. I’m trying to find a way to cheer her up.”

Lumian followed her gaze and noticed that Jenna’s face was also decorated with strange drawings—moles and a pig’s mouth. The lead dancer had similar marks.

“In that case, I’ll wait for you to finish,” Lumian said as he entered the living room.

Assuming Ciel was there for Jenna, the lead dancer hurriedly got up, washed her face, and left Apartment 601.

Being in a better mood, Jenna teasingly asked Lumian, “Are you here for me or Franca?”

That came out wrong… Lumian replied honestly, “Boss assigned me a strange mission, and I want to consult Franca.”

Curious, Franca asked, “What mission is it?”

Lumian briefly recounted the noon encounter, including how he managed to keep “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon in check, making them follow his instructions.

Both Franca and Jenna were scared by the head-only trader and the headless monster, and they fell into silence for a moment.

After a few seconds, Franca clenched her teeth and said, “Gardner Martin, that son of a bitch!”

“What’s wrong?” Jenna didn’t understand why Franca suddenly cursed the Boss.

Franca explained vaguely, “I suspect this mission is Gardner Martin’s way of testing Ciel. He wants to see if Ciel is fit to enter the core group.

“Dammit, f*cking hell, I’ve been with him for so long, and he still doesn’t trust me. He doesn’t even want to test me!”

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Chapter 276 - 276 The Disappointed Susie

276 The Disappointed Susie

Jenna, who had no experience in relationships and was clueless about the truth, didn't know how to respond to Franca's complaint.

Lumian roughly understood Franca's anger and disappointment.

We're all here to infiltrate the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Why is the test scheduled just a month after your joining? I've been here for nearly a year, and I'm almost giving birth to Gardner Martin's child, yet there's still no progress!

This makes me look like a failure!

After carefully considering Franca's thoughts, Lumian replied earnestly, "This might not be an opportunity, but a danger.

"The fact that they want to 'audit' me so quickly suggests they might see me as expendable. Or perhaps my Beyonder pathway is just right and could be useful for something recent."

Jenna found Lumian's explanation reasonable and quickly advised Franca, "Maybe the Boss didn't 'audit' you because he cares for you and doesn't want you involved in dangerous matters."

"…" Franca's expression turned odd. "That's not right…"

This made her feel guilty for deceiving others.

When Madam Judgment arranged for her to be an undercover agent in the Savoie Mob and wait for an opportunity to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order, she had been explicitly instructed not to sacrifice herself by seducing the target. The Tarot Club didn't engage in such tactics. Later, as a Witch, she wanted to experience a romantic relationship with a man, and Gardner Martin happened to be interested, so they became lovers.

From Franca's perspective, this was a pure, joy-sharing relationship that didn't involve any emotional aspects. They wouldn't have real expectations of each other. After the mission was completed, they would part ways without hesitation and continue with their exciting lives.

Of course, at that time, the Iron and Blood Cross Order might have already suffered a setback. It remained unknown if Gardner Martin could continue with his exciting life.

If Franca had enough strength, she would have rehearsed the scene of a cold assassin killing her lover.

After a few seconds, Franca exclaimed, “Impossible, impossible!”

“That guy is very chauvinistic and discriminates against women. Him not auditing me must be because he thinks that a woman should just manage the dancers well and have the ability to protect herself. She should just bear a child sometime later. She doesn’t need to be qualified to join the core group!

“Dammit! Did I fail because of my gender?”

What she didn’t want to admit was that the undercover mission had likely failed because she took a chance, which led her to form a stronger bond with Gardner Martin.

Cannon fodder didn’t matter if they were male or female!

It didn’t matter if the expendables of a secret organization were male or female either!

Jenna and Lumian exchanged glances and pursed their lips. Then, they turned to Franca and asked curiously, “How can you tell that the mission is a test?”

Those two monsters were undoubtedly terrifying and dangerous!

Jenna didn’t think she was as foolish as Lumian had teased her, but she knew she lacked experience in mysticism and playing these kinds of games. Subconsciously, she yearned to learn more.

Franca smiled again and said confidently, “I deduced it from the whole process and final outcome.

“Think about it. Does this matter really require Ciel, Simon, and Christo’s involvement?

“Find a couple of core members who understand the situation roughly. Follow the procedures and precautions, and you can escape the monsters and retrieve the box successfully. Moreover, there’s no need to worry about leaks or give them any special reminders.

“No matter how dangerous the darkness around us seems, the fact that nothing happened this time suggests that there’s a way and people to resist them. If someone else were to go, they could still complete the transaction.”

Jenna pondered Franca's analysis for a while and exclaimed in admiration, "That's true… Dammit! Why didn't I think of that just now?"

Hearing this, Franca and Lumian exchanged smug and pleased glances.

The fact that Jenna could curse meant she was gradually feeling better!

Lumian had also considered this before concluding that the Boss was "auditing" him.

So, it was very likely that there were observers around him during this period.

After some thought, Lumian asked Franca, "Do you know what those two monsters are?"

They lurked underground and were suspected to be related to Fourth Epoch Trier. Lumian might have to venture underground in the future using Earth Blood mineral. Knowing about the terrifying monsters he might encounter would help in his preparations.

Franca appeared thoughtful.

After a while, she said uncertainly, "Neither I nor anyone I know has encountered such monsters, but I've heard rumors from sailors.

"On the Sonia Sea, there's a port called Bansy. Once, a humanoid monster with a spine and no head appeared there. It sounds quite similar to what you described, but the port is now abandoned, likely due to damage caused by a high-level power."

Bansy? Lumian wasn't unfamiliar with the term.

Madam Magician had used it once to illustrate Cordu's likely fate. It had been severely corrupted and directly destroyed by the Church, leaving a deep impression on Lumian.

After chatting for a while, Lumian and Jenna returned to Salle de Bal Brise. Jenna had changed into a beige fluffy short dress and transformed into Showy Diva.

Late at night, upon returning to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian drew the curtains and unfolded a piece of letter paper. He penned down his encounter, thoughts, and Franca's analysis, preparing to send it to Madam Magician.

Shortly after, he arranged the altar, creating a wall of spirituality, and summoned the arm-height puppet messenger.

In the faint blue candlelight, Lumian gazed at the pale-white spirit world creature in a light-gold dress, with light-blue eyes and pure golden hair. A sudden idea struck him, and he asked thoughtfully, "Is there someone monitoring me nearby?"

The messenger spoke in an ethereal and illusory manner, “Yes.”

There really is… Lumian wasn’t surprised and pressed further, “Can he or they discover that I’m summoning you?”

The messenger’s eyes flickered as she replied disdainfully, “They’re not worthy.”

Relieved, Lumian thanked Miss Messenger and watched her vanish into the candlelight with the letter.

Before long, a neatly folded reply appeared on the desk in Room 207.

Lumian skillfully opened it and began reading.

“It’s not a good thing to be chosen so quickly and be tested.

“From now on, especially after becoming an official member, you have to be more careful. Once you’re assigned a mission and feel that things aren’t simple, something that even Mr. K might not be able to handle, find an opportunity to summon my messenger and inform me.

“The two monsters you encountered are indeed similar to those in Bansy, but they are quite different. They seem to have their own consciousness.

“As for what abilities and characteristics they can display, since Bansy Harbor has already been destroyed, I can’t give you any useful information.

“I believe most of what the head said is true. What it didn’t say was that it and its body might have entered Fourth Epoch Trier during the months he was missing.

“There’s a high chance they possess a method to enter Fourth Epoch Trier. You need to pay special attention to this matter.

“By the way, the Sequence after Alms Monk is a Contractee. You need to sign a contract with different creatures and obtain one of their abilities. When the time comes, don’t be in a hurry to choose. Write a letter and tell me that you already have the corresponding power. I can give you a pile of information on spirit world creatures for you to choose from. I have significant knowledge in this area. I’ll also give you a copy of Sights in the Spirit World.”

Madam Magician truly possesses a deep understanding of the spirit world… Lumian gleefully crumpled the letter and watched it fuse with the crimson flames.

…

On the sunny Sunday afternoon, Lumian satisfied his hunger and hopped into a public carriage headed for Trier’s botanical garden. After buying tickets, he leisurely strolled through the vibrant flora.

He marveled at the sight of many plants he had only encountered in books, newspapers, and magazines, including the Donningsman Tree, which the Intisians mocked as Loen's national tree.

These trees originally thrived in the rainforests of the Southern Continent. Legend had it that the sap from these trees could promote hair growth, a tempting prospect for many Loenians lacking significant hair volume.

Around 3:30 p.m., Lumian made his way to Mason café and settled into Booth D. He ordered a cup of Reem espresso, eagerly anticipating the arrival of Psychiatrist Madam Susie.

Before long, he heard a familiar, gentle female voice.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."

Without turning around, Lumian smiled and replied, "Good afternoon, Madam Susie."

Susie commented, sounding surprised, "Your mental state seems better than I expected."

Lumian smiled wryly.

"Perhaps it's thanks to my previous treatment that I've regained some inner strength.

"As the saying goes, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Susie expressed her curiosity, asking in a conversational tone, "I wonder if you're willing to share your experiences?"

Lumian pondered for a moment before looking ahead and muttering to himself, "Are you in the same organization as Madam Magician?"

"Yes," Susie confirmed.

Relaxing, Lumian leaned back on the sofa, sipped his espresso, and began recounting his ordeal.

From capturing Louis Lund to taking down Susanna Mattise and saving the lives of most people involved in Paramita, he concluded,

"Since that day, my mental state has significantly improved. It's like a fire still burning within my heart."

Susie responded gently, "Sometimes, life itself plays the role of a psychiatrist. Those experiences indeed triggered your inner strength and improved your condition. However, it also requires resilience and a suitable personality. Otherwise, one might easily descend into a state of collapse, despair, self-blame,

and abandonment."

"And this vulnerability might be exploited by the angel sealed within you."

At this point, Susie's emotions were complicated. She added with a hint of disappointment, "Your remarkable progress has rendered the treatment plan I prepared for today useless."

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Chapter 277 - 277 Guidance

277 Guidance

Susie's words elicited a chuckle from Lumian. "Isn't that a good thing?"

Susie replied, smiling, "That's a good thing. One of the happiest moments for every psychiatrist is to see their patient gradually emerge from their trauma."

Lumian probed, "Can we move on to the next stage of treatment?"

"Let's have a chat first. I'll assess your mental state." Susie's voice was gentle, and her demeanor remained calm.

"About what?" Lumian had already shared most of his recent experiences.

Susie verbally ruminated for a few seconds before responding, "We can talk about what else you're confused or troubled about."

Lumian fell silent momentarily before continuing, "Am I really the unlucky one? Will I bring disaster to the people around me?"

This time, it wasn't Susie who answered, but the other lady.

She said with a soothing chuckle, "If disaster is the inevitable fate of those around us, it isn't your fault. If it comes because of you and fate turns sour, it just means that destiny isn't set in stone.

"The entity sealed inside you by Mr. Fool isn't the entity named Inevitability—just an angel from the same realm. He can't use His powers and can only rely on others, so He can't determine a changed fate."

"So, you're saying I had a chance to change their fates, but I blew it all?" Lumian sipped his espresso, his voice unconsciously deepening.

The woman maintained her tone.

"First, we gotta be sure that the person who messed with their fate and caused their doom is the companion of that Inevitability angel lurking around you. He came for the seal and Termiboros. It's got nothing to do with you.

"Your only issue is that you didn't do good enough, but nobody can guarantee perfection in everything."

At this point, the woman spoke with a hint of self-deprecation,

“I get your feelings. Over the years, I’ve tried my best to do many things, but many of them failed. I even ended up hurting others despite my good intentions. It hit me hard and made me feel real guilty. I felt like running away and never coming back.

“Thankfully, during that time, I managed to achieve a lot. I helped people, stopped disasters, and rooted out corruption. That gave me confidence and motivation, strengthening my beliefs and ideas.

“Later, whenever I felt confident and positive about what I wanted to do, I’d remember my mistakes and failures. It would remind me not to be careless, not to be biased, and not to underestimate anyone.

“Likewise, when setbacks and guilt hit me, I’d remember the people I helped and the disasters I prevented. It reminded me that I’m not all bad, and my beliefs and ideas have a positive side.

“Our past experiences are both a burden and a source of strength, motivation, and growth.”

Lumian listened intently, finally facing the guilt in his heart and not suppressing it anymore.

Maybe some tragedies could’ve been avoided if I knew more about mysticism.

It is my problem, but I’m not the one causing the disaster. I just haven’t done a good enough job. I need to fix this weakness. I gotta strive to improve and be more careful in the future. I can genuinely save those who want help and bring disaster to those bastards who intentionally cause harm…

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian recalled the peddlers, pedestrians, and tenants who had fallen from the Tree of Shadow. He remembered how he had watched with a smile.

Phew… He let out a slow breath, leaning back against the sofa.

“I feel much better now.”

He scoffed and said, “The person who helped Termiboros and messed with my fate and the people around me couldn’t have guessed that the pain he caused didn’t break me, make me despair, or give up. Instead, it led me to get excellent psychiatric treatment, improving my mental state significantly.

“I really want to find him and ‘thank’ him in person.”

The lady chuckled.

“That’s why I keep telling Susie that psychiatric treatment is tricky and subtle. If you’re not careful, it could lead to the opposite outcome. You can’t just be fearless because you’re a Beyonder.

“Hmm… Let me remind you of something.

“We can’t assume the target’s current intentions solely based on their original image and goals without sufficient evidence.”

Lumian didn’t quite understand.

“What do you mean?”

The lady explained in a gentle voice, “Many people are deceived because they always assume the other person remains the same, believing that their personalities and thoughts won’t change due to the environment, experiences, and circumstances.

“Take what you just said as an example. Have you considered another possibility? Termiboros’s companion might have deliberately brought those misfortunes not to make you collapse, but to stimulate you and awaken the power in your heart, allowing you to break free from your mental cage and regain your mental state?”

“How is that possible?” Lumian responded subconsciously.

Could Termiboros’s companion be so benevolent?

She smiled and replied, “Just because I’m giving an example doesn’t mean it’s true.

“But why is that impossible? Perhaps that person initially wanted to cooperate with Termiboros and use various methods to influence your state and create an opportunity for Him to escape the seal. However, gradually, he realized that this was an opportunity that could turn him into an angel.

“As he receives more boons and sees the angelic-level door, he can extract Termiboros’s power by controlling you. He can even undo the seal and devour Him while He is weak.

“And to increase the probability of success, he has to ensure that you’re in good condition. You can extract Termiboros’s power time and time again, weakening Him.

“How is it? Does he have a motive to help you improve your mental state?”

Lumian fell silent.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that from a human’s perspective, this was an undeniable possibility.

After a few seconds, he retorted, “Is that person not afraid of angering the entity known as Inevitability?

“The power from boons is definitely more influenced by the higher-ups. They are proud to carry out Their will and wouldn’t have any blasphemous thoughts.”

The woman in Psychological Invisibility laughed meaningfully and said, “The being known as Inevitability desires an obedient angel to descend upon this land. Whether it’s Termiboros or another bestower, I reckon He holds no particular preference or inclination.”

That’s true. If someone devours Termiboros, they might become an angel of the Inevitability domain. Perhaps this is what Inevitability expects. If Termiboros can make it here, so be it. If He fails and faces a seal or purification, other bestowers will seek a way to devour His relic and become an angel. Ultimately, an angel in service of Inevitability will emerge on Earth. But the identity of this angel is not crucial… Lumian pondered as he nodded gently.

Suddenly, a wave of inspiration washed over Lumian. He considered the lady who was suspected of wielding the Justice card. Was she not only using this opportunity to teach him, but also conveying these words to Termiboros?

Could she be creating a rift between Termiboros and Inevitability, making Him distrust His companion?

If I can think of this possibility, surely Termiboros can as well…

Uh, He could have figured this out, but since His companion has been discovered, he wouldn’t dare to show himself for a long while, nor would he communicate with Him. In such times, suspicions would easily grow between them.

Once the seed of suspicion took root and flourished, it would prove difficult to uproot in the future!

A Spectator is truly terrifying…

Lumian sighed and said sincerely, “I understand.”

The lady smiled and said, “So, we can’t assume that people won’t change; they can evolve over time. We need to pay close attention to their circumstances and thoughts.

“Other Beyonders might not need to think so deeply, but your next Sequence is a Conspirer. You have to learn to analyze human nature.”

Lumian nodded, gaining a fresh perspective on Gardner Martin’s teachings. “The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else’s.”

Continuing the discussion, he smiled and asked, “Is it possible that Termiboros’s companion intended to help me improve my mental state from the beginning?”

“That’s a possibility,” Susie replied, “but what would be the reason?”

“Why?” Lumian inquired.

His expression suddenly changed, and he sat up straight, trembling slightly.

“Maybe, just maybe, she wanted to help me. She’s…”

The lady, suspected to be the holder of the Justice card, interrupted gently.

“Your memories are unlikely lying to you.”

Lumian let out a long sigh and relaxed against the sofa once more.

The lady’s voice remained soft as she continued, “However, in the world of mysticism, there are cases where a person’s death might not be their true end.

“The world of mysticism holds too many mysteries.

“Once, I encountered a follower of an evil god. He suddenly died just as I was about to eliminate him. It felt too coincidental, so I examined his corpse, his fate, and various mystical connections. Everything seemed in order; he was truly dead, and his family and friends believed so as well.

“Later, when I was eradicating a subsidiary branch of an evil god cult, I came across him again. He had assumed a new identity with a new fate and mystical connection.

“This time, he met his final end. From him, I learned the Sequence name of an evil god pathway—Deceased. They can use death to escape their original fate.”

This is similar to the Substitution Spell, but it seems simpler and lacks prerequisites. Moreover, after the substitute’s demise, the original identity and fate appear irretrievable… Lumian pondered on this, recalling a ritualistic magic that came with Alms Monk.

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Chapter 278 - 278 Consultation

278 Consultation

The lady believed to hold the Justice card fell silent, and it was Susie who spoke up.

“Your mental state has improved significantly. If you’d like, I can guide you back into the dream to awaken those forgotten memories.”

“No problem.” Lumian leaned against the sofa and closed his eyes.

Unbeknownst to him, he dozed off. He found himself in Cordu, bathed in sunlight amidst the mountains, surrounded by turquoise alpine pastures. White-gray sheep roamed like clouds, creating a painting-like scene.

The events unfolded like an art exhibition. Lumian alternated between experiencing them firsthand and observing as a bystander, his thoughts deeply immersed in the unfolding drama.

As the events progressed, the weather mirrored Lumian’s mood, turning increasingly gray and devoid of sunlight. Occasionally, the fog lifted, revealing an azure sky.

These memories confirmed Lumian’s suspicions. An anomaly had been brewing in the village from May to June of last year.

Initially, he didn’t pay much attention, but by the end of the year, he realized the seriousness of the issue. Aurore didn’t take his concerns seriously, dismissing them without investigation.

He later discovered skeletons in Louis Lund’s closet and extracted information from him. In the new year, more villagers began revealing certain problems, leading some unaffected ones to sense that something was wrong. As a result, Ava, Reimund, Naroka, and others were silenced.

During this process, Lumian stumbled upon Pons Bénet and his crew burying a corpse and sought revenge, gravely injuring the villain’s lower body. However, he couldn’t take on the thugs alone and ultimately failed.

Pons Bénet almost crippled him, but Aurore arrived just in time to rescue him.

Only then did Lumian realize that something was amiss with his sister. She was suspected to be part of the padre’s group and held a high status.

Most of the time, she appeared cold and indifferent, which was completely different from the sister Lumian knew. Only rarely did she show her true self. Worried for both her and her brother's future, she sought help.

However, she never mentioned summoning the messenger of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president, Hela. The information in Lumian's dream likely came from her soul fragment.

What followed matched Madame Pualis's account. Aurore stopped her, and Guillaume Bénet, the padre, led a large group of bestowers to attack the administrator's castle, dismantling her setup. She had no choice but to abandon the "territory" she had built up for a long time and leave Cordu with her remaining subordinates.

The only difference was Madame Pualis's claim that she had only given birth to one child whose father was the padre—he eventually perished in the attack. However, Aurore, a Blessed of Inevitability, stated that Madame Pualis had personally given birth to two children. One of them vanished after the administrator's castle was destroyed.

In the end, it wasn't Aurore who knocked Lumian out and brought him to the altar. It was the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, who also had a lizard-like elf crawl out of him in his dream.

Lumian blinked open his eyes, taking deep breaths to steady himself.

He had anticipated this moment, but the emotional upheaval still left him reeling.

Emerging from the nightmarish life of a street urchin, he had finally found a true, warm home with new friends and boundless joy. Even the villagers' chase and occasional beatings for his pranks couldn't dampen his spirits during those moments of triumph.

However, his idyllic life began to unravel as the people around him changed. The constant anomalies he noticed clouded his heart with growing unease and uncertainty. He tried to persuade his friends, Aurore, Reimund, Ava, and others, to leave Cordu and move to Darième, but Aurore always delayed, thwarting his plans.

Amidst his fear and disappointment, tragedy struck his friends. To his dismay, he even noticed disturbing signs in his own beloved sister.

In that moment, his mind plummeted into a dark abyss, much like when his grandfather had died. He felt terrified, helpless, sorrowful, and in pain.

But this time, he also felt a profound sense of despair.

Had it not been for the occasional glimmer of hope when Aurore briefly regained her true self, Lumian might not have held on till the end.

Even now, recollecting the past few months felt unbearable. It was as if he was trapped in a suffocating cage, surrounded by darkness and misery, unable to escape. It was suffocating, painful, and full of despair.

Phew, phew… Taking deep breaths, Lumian gradually regained his composure and offered a bitter smile.

"Just as I suspected."

He hadn't personally experienced the remaining pieces of the puzzle concerning the catastrophe. He needed to decipher the dream's symbols or find the padre Guillaume Bénet to obtain the missing information.

Susie spoke in a gentle tone, "You've shown tremendous resilience and faced your past head-on. It's a sign that your psychological struggles have improved significantly. Now, the rest of the healing process lies in your own hands."

"If everything goes as planned, we should only have one more psychiatric session. After you find padre Guillaume Bénet and communicate with him, I'll need to evaluate your psychological state once again and conclude the treatment."

"Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you…" Lumian hesitated before adding, "Madam Justice."

The woman in Psychological Invisibility didn't deny it and smiled, saying, "Just because we have only one session left doesn't mean we won't be in touch again. I might need your assistance with certain matters in the future."

Lumian smiled back, saying, "I'm only a Sequence 7. I doubt I'll be of much help."

"We should never underestimate anyone," the lady replied with a knowing smile. "Besides, different people can have unique impacts on different matters."

Lumian nodded and said, "No problem."

He pondered for a moment before changing the subject.

"Ladies, after the Cordu disaster, my sister pushed me away and instructed me to take note of her grimoires. Given your understanding of human nature, what might be hidden in her notebook, and where could it be?"

Though Lumian had studied Aurore's entire grimoire multiple times, he still couldn't grasp many aspects or find anything suspicious.

Susie responded promptly, "Aurore wouldn't have intentionally left any messages or clues in her grimoires. If there were, she would have told you directly or hinted at it once she regained consciousness."

Lumian nodded slowly, accepting her explanation. Aurore could have sought help from Hela's messenger, but she chose not to.

Susie continued, "I believe there might be something in the notebook that Aurore once considered normal, but later suspected was amiss. So, identifying any abnormalities through superficial observation alone would be challenging."

No wonder I've been stumped for so long… Lumian asked anxiously, "Then how can I figure out if there's a problem?"

The holder of the Justice card seemed lost in thought as she spoke, "Since you've deduced that the anomaly began in May or June of last year, focus on that particular time frame to find the root of the problem.

"If the source truly lies with Aurore, she must have encountered something before that period that caused her transformation. So, pay special attention to the grimoires six months prior. It's likely to contain something significant that triggered her change.

"Additionally, the grimoires from the last three months might reveal Aurore's true intentions. They are an essential part of the castle in her heart.

"If you analyze these two time periods, you're most likely to find something relevant."

January to June last year, and January to March this year… Lumian mentally noted Madam Justice's advice.

As Aurore's grimoire spanned over five years, narrowing down the suspected content would save Lumian a considerable amount of time and effort.

If he focused solely on the notebooks from those two periods, his workload would decrease by 90%, enabling him to analyze and consider them more effectively.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian expressed his gratitude once again.

"Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you, Madam Justice."

After their discussion, the psychiatric treatment came to an official close. Lumian finished the remaining espresso and left Mason café, waiting for the public carriage by the roadside.

In Trier, dark clouds gathered to the northwest in the distance, while raindrops cascaded down like threads. To the southeast, the sky remained azure, and pure white clouds were tinged with golden light.

…

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

“Let’s attend a gathering,” Franca said to Jenna.

“What gathering?” Jenna, who hadn’t yet put on her smoky makeup, asked with confusion.

Franca rarely invited her to such events.

Franca chuckled.

“A mysticism gathering. Now that you’ve digested the Assassin potion, you should consider advancing to Instigator. Attending mysticism gatherings, gathering materials and information, and earning money and supplies are compulsory tasks for every wild Beyonder.”

“Advancing?” Jenna was bewildered, as the term was unfamiliar to her.

Franca clicked her tongue and explained, “An important figure told me that the number of evil god believers will increase in the foreseeable future. The same goes for various mysticism-related disasters.

“If you wish to protect yourself, your brother, and the people you care about, you must progress step by step on the divine paths and grow stronger.”

Jenna fell silent for a few seconds before finally nodding and saying, “Okay.”

“Then let’s go.” Franca smiled again.

However, Jenna hesitated for a moment before adding, “Should we invite Ciel? It seems like he also needs to attend mysticism gatherings.”

“…” Franca’s expression froze.

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Chapter 279 - 279 Deep Valley Cloister

279 Deep Valley Cloister

After a moment, Franca forced on a reassuring smile and spoke, “Don’t worry about him. He’s got his own mystical gatherings.”

Jenna nodded and didn’t say much more.

With disguises, masks, and a bit of makeup, they left 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches and made their way to Avenue du Marché. They hopped on Subway Line 2, which connected the bustling market district’s Suhit steam locomotive station to the elegant cathedral district’s Northern Trier Train Station. Their destination was Quartier 9, the renowned Quartier de la Maison d’Opéra in the Northern Continent.

They arrived at the world’s largest and most vibrant arcade, surrounded by department stores and fancy shops. The colorful glass dome above, supported by steel frames, painted the sunlight with a touch of grandeur, showcasing scenes of sacredness and epic tales.

To make up for the dimness from the stained glass, new kerosene lamps on the iron-black street lamp poles burned brightly, emitting a dazzling white light.

They were called draft lamps that utilized the heat they generated to turn kerosene into steam, spraying it onto the scorching mantle around it, creating a bright white light.

In terms of illumination, they were far superior to conventional gas street lamps or regular household kerosene lamps, a modification of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery.

Jenna followed Franca into the public washroom in the middle of the Opera House arcade. Each found a stall, changed their clothes, and applied simple makeup to downplay their looks.

After that, they headed underground through a nearby entrance.

Unlike other districts in Trier, the underground street beneath the Opera House arcade was bustling with people. Cafés, galleries, beer houses, and small shops filled the space, making it feel anything but dark, cold, or confined.

Only when they left the area did Jenna find her usual impression of Underground Trier.

As Assassins, they could see in the dark. However, to avoid exposing their Sequence abilities to those attending the mysterious gathering, they each held a carbide lamp that cast a bluish-yellow light ahead.

Studying Franca's actions closely, Jenna mimicked her and donned a silver metal mask that covered the upper half of her face. Silently, she ventured deeper into the damp tunnel.

After walking for a while, Franca pointed to a fork in the road and smiled.

"There's a legend of ghosts in that direction."

"What's the legend?" Jenna asked, playing along.

Franca grinned and replied, "They say people in the opera house often hear strange male voices coming from underground. They hired several bounty hunters to investigate, but none of them returned."

"Didn't the official Beyonders intervene?" Jenna inquired, puzzled.

"They did, but they found nothing. That's because it's a legend we made up," Franca chuckled.

Jenna was even more perplexed.

"Why make up such a legend?"

For amusement?

Franca assured her, smiling, "To prevent the people of Underground Trier from meddling with our gathering."

Jenna finally realized the reason behind it.

"So, you scared them off, and they wouldn't dare come here?"

"No." Franca shook her head with a serious expression. "No, it's not about scaring them away. It's about diverting their attention to that area, so they don't bother with the surroundings. In simpler terms, it gives the adventurous Trier citizens and university students something to keep them occupied."

Having grown up in Trier, Jenna fell silent. After a few seconds, she muttered, "Dammit! The Trieriens around me are nothing like this!"

Everyone worked diligently. They just liked to go to bars, dance halls, and other places to drink, sing, dance, or vent their emotions by cursing each other after a busy day.

"People from Trier can be different," Franca said, clicking her tongue and shaking her head.

As they talked, they squeezed through a gap and entered a new tunnel, arriving at a quarry cave overgrown with dark green moss.

Outside the quarry cave stood a white skeleton, its face hidden behind an iron mask, its eye sockets dark and empty.

Jenna, who had never encountered anything related to mysticism before, couldn't help but feel her heart race with fear.

Franca raised her hand and greeted, "You always send a skeleton. Is all this caution really necessary?"

"Dammit, you even put a mask on the skeleton. What's there to be embarrassed about?" she added.

The white skeleton spoke with a voice that sounded like metal rubbing against metal, "I like a line from The Adventurer series: 'That's basic courtesy.'"

With its eye sockets devoid of flames, it looked at Jenna.

"Who is she?"

"My friend. I brought her here to take a look," Franca simply replied.

The skeleton didn't push for more information. It cracked its neck, signaling that they could enter the quarry cave at the back.

Inside, Jenna saw many people in various disguises, either sitting on rocks or standing in a corner. Silence enveloped the place.

After scanning the area, Jenna lowered her voice and asked Franca, "They're letting me in just like that?"

Isn't this too easy?

Aren't they concerned about my trustworthiness or safety?

Franca smirked and replied, "I trust him, and he trusts me."

"Is that so…" Jenna nodded, but she sensed something strange. "How did that skeleton know it was you? Weren't you disguised?"

"He has a special way of recognizing people," Franca vaguely explained.

Fifteen minutes later, more people arrived one after another. By the time the iron-masked skeleton announced the official commencement of the trade gathering, nearly twenty people had gathered in the quarry cave.

Jenna observed the transactions with curiosity, absorbing the new terms as Franca whispered them to her.

During this process, she couldn't help but be shocked by the prices of potion formulas, mystical items, Beyonder weapons, and various ingredients. Even the cheapest ones required an entire week's salary as an underground singer. As for the expensive ones, she felt that she had no hope in her life.

The last third of the trade gathering focused on commissions. Jenna sat up straight, hoping to find one that could earn her a large sum of money.

A man dressed in a black robe, resembling a Warlock from horror stories, spoke in a deliberately shrill voice, "I have a mission worth 20,000 verl d'or."

20,000 verl d'or? All eyes in the room turned to the entrustee.

Jenna was no exception. She had never seen such a large sum of money in her life.

The man glanced around and said, "The gatekeeper of the Deep Valley Cloister in the hill district has been missing for three days. I hope you can help me find him or his corpse.

"I can't verify the authenticity of the clues, so only those who bring him or his corpse back to the Deep Valley Cloister can claim the 20,000 verl d'or reward.

"Alternatively, you can bring him here."

The Deep Valley Cloister belonged to the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, where ascetic monks devoted themselves to the study of machinery and steam. They didn't marry, have children, or preach.

Located in the hill district, Quartier 19, it was bordered by the cathedral district of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery's cathedral and the Northern Trier Train Station to the west, and Quartier 20, the cemetery district, to the east.

Seeing no immediate response, the man continued, "The authorities have already investigated, but they found nothing.

"You can all take this commission and investigate Deep Valley Cloister as bounty hunters. Don't worry about suspicion. I'll post notices in bars, dance halls, and beer houses in various districts."

I can give it a try. It won't cost me anything if I come up with nothing. At most, it'll take some time from me making money… Jenna turned to Franca, tempted.

Franca nodded, agreeing that they could take on this mission.

She was curious about the case, and she wanted Jenna to gain some experience before resorting to dangerous assassinations. If they sensed any danger or discovered something amiss, they could retreat in time.

Of course, the high bounty was also appealing.

After a brief silence, the participants began asking questions one after another.

They wanted to gather enough information before starting their investigations.

The entrustee's responses were brief. He informed everyone that the missing cloister's gatekeeper was Pinker, a resident of nearby Deep Valley Town in his early fifties. He was a devout believer of the God of Steam and Machinery, and he had never married. With a fanatical passion for machinery, he became a gatekeeper at Deep Valley Cloister after owning fields.

He returned home once a week, spending one day each time, but he didn't disappear at home.

One night, while the monks were testing a steam contraption in the courtyard, they spotted Pinker standing at the door of the gatekeeper's hut, watching with interest. But the next morning, he was gone.

Jenna took note of the information just like during her acting studies.

Before long, the mysticism gathering concluded, and the participants departed in groups.

…

A few nights later, Lumian sat at the bar in Salle de Bal Brise, savoring his favorite absinthe and watching Jenna sing and dance.

Just then, Louis approached him and whispered in his ear, "Boss, the Big Boss is here. He's waiting for you at the café on the second floor."

"Boss came personally?" Lumian was slightly surprised.

Without saying a word, he downed the rest of the green liquid, stood up, and headed towards the stairs.

At that moment, Gardner Martin stood near the window, dressed casually in a dark brown jacket and a wide-brimmed hat, as if he had just come from the docks or the depot.

He looked at Lumian with his brownish-red eyes for a moment before motioning for the others to leave.

Soon, only Gardner Martin and Lumian remained in the café.

The Savoie Mob boss smiled and said, "I've expressed my admiration for you more than once, haven't I?"

"Indeed, thank you, Boss." Lumian nodded.

Gardner Martin's expression turned serious.

“Are you interested in joining my circle? This will allow you to come into contact with more Beyonders, stronger powers, and abundant resources.”

Is that all for the audit? Lumian wondered, not hiding his puzzlement.

“What’s the price?”

Gardner Martin smiled again.

“The price is that you might encounter more danger and have to follow orders to complete certain missions.

“However, as long as you do well, you will definitely progress rapidly. Perhaps in a few years, you can take my position.”

Lumian pretended to hesitate and pondered for a moment before saying, “I don’t have a problem with that.”

Gardner Martin nodded solemnly.

“Before that, you need to undergo a test.

“Go to 13 Avenue du Marché now and stay there until the sun rises.”

13 Avenue du Marché? Lumian frowned, doing his best to recall.

Finally, he remembered where that was.

Osta Trul, the Secrets Suppliant, considered it the most dangerous place in the market district.

It was the burned-down building that had yet to be demolished!

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Chapter 280 - 280 The Knocker

280 The Knocker

As Lumian thought of 13 Avenue du Marché, his first instinct was that Gardner Martin intended to do him harm.

The place is abnormal, a mystery even to official Beyonders. Why are you asking me to spend the night there?

The image of the dark, charred building he had seen through the Mystery Prying Glasses still lingered in his mind, with a blurry face staring back at him through the empty eyes behind a window.

It had given him an uneasy feeling, as Osta Trul had warned it was a dangerous place. However, Lumian had no interest in exploring it and wouldn't have triggered any anomalies due to him lacking an adventurous spirit, so he put it aside.

Amidst his thoughts, Lumian dismissed the idea that Gardner Martin would set a trap in the charred building to harm him.

As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order—a secret organization—a powerful Beyonder likely at Sequence 5 or at minimum a 6, Gardner had other, more direct methods to deal with subordinates with ulterior motives.

Simultaneously, Lumian recalled everything he had seen and heard recently.

The charred building stood close to Rue des Blouses Blanches. Each time he passed it while going to his safe house from Salle de Bal Brise or searching for Franca, he would see vagrants seeking refuge from the rain inside. Never had he witnessed any official Beyonders or patrolling police shooing them away, nor had he heard of any fatalities occurring there.

For three reasons, Lumian considered the charred building highly perilous. Firstly, Osta Trul's spiritual perception had urged him. Secondly, its existence remained intact, as if some mysterious force prevented its demolition. Thirdly, his experience with the Mystery Prying Glasses had left him with a certain feeling.

Combining all these signs, Lumian couldn't help but think there was indeed a problem. And it wasn't some trivial matter either. Though under normal circumstances, these abnormalities were unlikely to be triggered; they required specific conditions.

But if there wasn't any trouble, why would Gardner Martin arrange for me to spend the night there? Is it some kind of courage test? That's pointless, Lumian thought to himself.

He believed that the most striking impression he left on Gardner Martin and the others was that of his boldness.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian stared at Gardner Martin, showing his concern and suspicion.

"13 Avenue du Marché? I've heard there's something strange going on there."

"If nothing were amiss, what kind of test would it be to send you there for a night?" Gardner Martin replied with a smile. "As long as your response is flawless, I believe you'll come out of it unscathed."

So, this is a test to see how I handle a 'sudden' abnormality without any prior information? Lumian nodded in understanding, but the situation left him even more puzzled.

If that's the case, why did Gardner Martin come here in the middle of the night and ask me to go to 13 Avenue du Marché immediately? Couldn't he have waited until daytime for me to do this? Then, he could test my ability to gather information and see who I'll contact…

Now, I won't have the chance to summon Madam Magician's messenger and seek her opinion or possible help, allowing me not to face the hidden danger of the charred building alone…

But Gardner Martin doesn't know that I can summon a demigod's messenger. That's probably not what he's worried about… If he suspects that I have another faction backing me, he wouldn't have given me a chance to infiltrate the core— in other words—the Iron and Blood Cross Order. He would have already found a way to make me completely 'disappear'…

Yes, if he really suspects me, he'll give me ample time to see where I go and who I contact to determine if there's a problem…

He must have some hidden motive for making things so urgent…

Giving me time to prepare means I might go back on my word. Instead of heading to 13 Avenue du Marché, I might turn around and sell information about this charred building's possible connection to the Iron and Blood Cross Order to the authorities?

But the problem is, even if I manage to stay until the sun rises, I can still go back on my word or betray them… I'll be apprehended right then and there and forced to sign a contract?

After careful consideration, Lumian still couldn't decipher Gardner Martin's true intentions.

The test was likely just one aspect, but there had to be a hidden motive!

The only thing Lumian was sure of was that Gardner Martin wasn't planning to kill him—at least not for the time being. This mission might be life-threatening, but the real danger lay elsewhere.

With various thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian finally made up his decision.

"Alright, I'll go now."

Gardner Martin grinned.

"Excellent. If you'd agreed too quickly, it would have disappointed me.

"One of the most crucial traits for those who join our core is intelligence and the ability to think. Otherwise, why wouldn't I just purchase a few new steam robots from the God of Steam and Machinery Church?"

Are you suggesting that Franca is smart, but not very much so? She thinks, but not holistically? Lumian couldn't help but criticize inwardly.

Of course, he knew that this wasn't the reason why the Boss refused to let Franca join the core team.

After his inner critique, Lumian responded to Gardner Martin with a smile, "I'm looking forward to experiencing the core you've described, Boss."

As he spoke, he turned around and prepared to head downstairs to 13 Avenue du Marché.

Gardner Martin casually called out to him, "Don't reveal this to anyone, not even to those sleeping with you, like Jenna, who's singing downstairs."

"Alright," Lumian said, though he didn't give it much thought.

He had to share this with Franca and Jenna!

However, the two of them had been busy investigating the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper and hadn't paid much attention to the affairs of the Savoie Mob.

After leaving Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian touched his left chest.

Then, he drew a triangular Sacred Emblem, as if praying to the God of Steam and Machinery for good luck.

There was still water on the ground from the rain. Lumian followed the iron-black street lamps and reached the intersection near Rue des Blouses Blanches at a moderate pace.

A pitch-black six-story building stood diagonally in front of him. Many of the walls had collapsed, as if pairs of empty, pitch-black “eyes” had grown out of the house.

At that moment, two or three tramps were sleeping on the ground floor, devoid of doors or window frames. It was strewn with blackened bricks and charred wood.

Lumian stood by the roadside and observed for a while, but he couldn’t find the blurry face pressed against the window.

Must I wear the Mystery Prying Glasses to “see” it? Without hesitation, Lumian passed through the filthy doorway and entered the target building.

He felt no abnormalities from his body to his soul.

Walking around the tramps, Lumian found what appeared to be the activity room.

There was a small room inside. The wooden door was charred and wobbly, but it remained intact. Beyond the shattered glass window lay an alley behind Avenue du Marché.

Lumian walked in and carefully closed the wooden door.

Then, he sat by the window, ready to climb out of the abnormal building at a moment’s notice.

Amidst the inevitable torment, time ticked by, and the night deepened. Lumian remained oblivious to any abnormalities. It was so quiet that only the tramps’ occasional coughs echoed.

Suddenly, he straightened his back.

He heard sluggish footsteps.

The footsteps drew nearer, knocking on the dilapidated wooden door that couldn’t be locked, instantly tainting the quiet night with an uneasy atmosphere.

At that moment, Termiboros’s magnificent voice echoed in Lumian’s mind.

“Don’t respond.”

Don’t respond… Lumian’s hair stood on end.

Although he couldn’t fully trust the Inevitability angel, considering the current situation, he chose to look at the door silently after weighing the pros and cons.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The knocks on the door echoed one after another, the intervals long, slow, and heavy.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

After a while, the person outside finally spoke.

“Help me. I was the one sleeping outside.

“Help me, help me. A murderer has barged in!”

This fabrication is absurd… Lumian calmed his tense nerves by entertaining himself.

He didn’t respond, acting as though there was no one in the small room.

The voice outside grew more intense, but the pace slowed. There was an indistinct, strange pause.

“He’s. Here! He’s. Here! I’m. About. To. Be. Killed!

“The next one. Is. You!”

As soon as he finished speaking, the person knocking on the door suddenly let out a scream.

Lumian heard a dull thud.

Thud! It was as if someone had fallen to the ground.

Then, a heavy object outside the door was slowly dragged further away.

Before long, a bone-chilling cutting sound filled the room, accompanied by the sound of gnawing and loud chewing.

An image suddenly surfaced in Lumian’s mind: A shadowy figure squatted on the ground, dividing a human corpse with an axe and other items. Occasionally, it would pick up an arm and take a few bites.

After a while, the similar commotion vanished.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

There was another knock on Lumian’s small room.

“If you don’t. Open the door. I’ll. Come in. Myself.” It was the same person who had asked for help.

Lumian gazed at the shaky wooden door and had an idea.

As long as I don't respond, the abnormality outside won't be able to open this door and truly threaten me?

This door is clearly unlocked and was burned by the fire. It's very fragile, but it can't open it…

It doesn't have the ability to open any door. Does it require a response from the person behind the door to establish a connection in the mystical sense?

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian gained a deeper understanding of the current situation and felt more confident.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Amidst the knocking, the person outside spoke in a staccato manner, "I am not. Lying.

"I really will. Open the door. And come in.

"I'll give you. Another. Ten seconds."

Lumian scoffed, feeling increasingly certain.

He wanted to mock the other party in his heart and tell it to open if it had what it took, but he was worried that it would also be considered a response, so he suppressed those thoughts.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Three more knocks separated by a long pause.

Suddenly, Lumian heard an inaudible creak.

Then, he saw the rickety wooden door slowly pull back, revealing a dark crack.

It was opening.

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Chapter 281 - 281 Reflection

281 Reflection

As the charred and decrepit wooden door creaked open slowly, Lumian felt a shiver down his spine, like ice water trickling over his scalp.

Wasn't it impossible to open the door?

Was my guess wrong?

If it could open the door, why did it take so long and talk so much?

Just get on with it! Is there something wrong with its brain?

Although Lumian had become a Pyromaniac and had experienced various dangerous situations, his heart couldn't help but race at this moment. It felt like a steam locomotive hurtling on tracks and pillowwood. If he weren't worried about Gardner Martin or other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order lurking nearby, he would have set up an altar then and there, summoning Madam Magician's messenger or praying to Mr. Fool.

Instinctively, Lumian prepared to summon Fire Raven and create a cloak, readying himself for a battle. But Termiboros's warning echoed in his mind once more: Don't respond.

This was entirely different from just not opening the door! Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that something fishy was going on. Why would the creature knock on the door, threaten him, and then open it itself? So, he restrained himself, staying silent and staring at the door like a statue.

The charred wooden door continued to swing open, and the dark gap gradually widened, enough for one person to pass through. But there was nothing outside the door. The room, far from the window, was engulfed in darkness. The crimson moonlight seeping through the broken glass barely revealed any outlines.

Where was the fellow that knocked on the door? Lumian's first instinct was to activate his Spirit Vision to see if there was an invisible monster. But he held back, afraid that it would count as a response.

The wobbly door came to a halt, and nothing emerged from the darkness outside. No wriggling shapes, just silence. Lumian remained motionless in his sitting position, gazing in that direction. This whole situation was incredibly bizarre. He couldn't even target an enemy if he wanted to set them on fire.

Silence took over, and time seemed to stand still. Then suddenly, a drop of liquid fell from the ceiling, landing in front of Lumian. His eyelids twitched, and under the crimson moonlight, he saw that it was bright red, resembling blood.

Drip. Drip. Blood dripped, gradually staining a large area red.

Lumian couldn't shake the unease that crept over him.

Drip!

Another droplet landed on Lumian's right cheek. It was cold, sticky, and silky. It didn't seem like human blood, but it wasn't tainted by darkness either. The pungent smell of blood filled Lumian's nostrils, making him want to roll to the side, stand up, and leap out of the window instinctively.

Don't respond. He recalled Termiboros's words once again.

Lumian took a deep breath, allowing the viscous liquid that smelled like blood to hit his face and head. Gradually, he felt his body grow heavier. He quickly examined his exposed hands.Cold, viscous blood dripped onto his hands, silently merging into one, as if encasing him in a blood-colored glove.

Lumian began to suspect that he was trapped in a mucous blood membrane, making him feel heavier and heavier. Instinctively, he thought about reaching into his pocket to pull out Mr. K's finger. He wanted the Aurora Order Oracle, skilled in blood-related spells, to help him resist this strange mucous blood membrane.

"Don't respond." This time, the Inevitability angel's powerful voice echoed in Lumian's mind, instead of him reminding himself of Termiboros's earlier warning.

Lumian managed to regain control of himself, but he could feel his body growing heavier, and his breathing became labored. Slowly, the strange blood began to seep into his skin, as if it had a life of its own, determined to enter his body and consume him from the inside out.

As the blood infiltrated him, his thoughts grew hazy, and a surge of violent tendencies flooded his mind. The urge to kill and burn everything—this place, Trier, the entire world—overwhelmed him!

Dammit! Could Termiboros be using this opportunity to deceive me and use the strange power here to take control and escape the seal. He couldn't help but question the effectiveness of Termiboros's "don't respond" and the true intentions of the Inevitability angel.

Despite wanting to resist and break free from the burned-down building, Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that there was something mystical about the "abnormality" and the creature's persistence in knocking, talking, and asking for permission.

If he hadn't harbored those suspicions, he wouldn't have fully trusted Termiboros, an enemy rather than a friend. He wouldn't have endured until now. With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian decided to hold on a little longer and observe what would happen next.

His head felt heavy, and his thoughts grew increasingly chaotic. A grinding sound rang in his ears, and his body seemed to ache from a distant pain. It was as if he was slipping into a semi-conscious state, while someone took the opportunity to dismember him, severing his limbs and tearing his body apart.

Then, suddenly, Lumian's consciousness withdrew. It was as if his spirit had separated from his body. He watched himself sitting by the window, covered in blood, with his eyes strangely empty. In front of him squatted a charred figure, brandishing a bloodied axe and hacking at his thigh, splitting the bone in half.

Uh… Lumian slowly realized that something was amiss.

He instinctively looked down and saw that his body remained whole!

He was still sitting by the shattered window, but the scene he witnessed was no longer the crumbling charred wooden door. Instead, he saw a "reflection" of his surroundings and his own dismemberment by the burnt shadow.

Compared to his severed legs and extracted bones, the most striking aspect was his empty, lifeless eyes.

After a brief daze, the horrifying and bloody vision disappeared, and the open, dilapidated wooden door returned to his sight.

He knew it wasn't an illusion because he felt as if he had surfaced from water, and his entire body relaxed.

If I had responded, what would have happened? Would the nightmarish scenes I saw have become real? Would that response have established a mystical connection, allowing those terrifying and almost illusionary encounters to materialize? Lumian exhaled slowly, fear still lingering in his heart.

He placed his hand on his left chest, lowered his voice, and chuckled.

"Temiboros, you truly are remarkable."

Indeed, a worthy angel. Even in His sealed state, He easily discerned the essence of the abnormality.

Termiboros's voice echoed, overlapping as if from multiple sources. "The abnormality here is considered minor."

"Minor?" Lumian couldn't believe it. "If you hadn't reminded me not to respond and if I hadn't been determined enough, something terrible might have occurred. That Gardner Martin, that vile scoundrel, really wants me dead!"

Termiboros replied in a thunderous voice, “You won’t die. The abnormality will merely transform you, leading your thoughts to become fanatical about certain things while rejecting others.”

Lumian pondered the explanation, finding it a bit hard to grasp.

Just then, Termiboros added, “It’s like being conquered, both physically and mentally.”

Suddenly, realization dawned on Lumian, and he spoke quietly, “Gardner Martin wanted me to stay here overnight so he could use this anomaly to control me and eliminate any potential threats.

No wonder he came to Salle de Bal Brise so late and didn’t give me time to think!

Termiboros confirmed Lumian’s suspicion, “Have you only just realized how shallow you are?”

Lumian cursed under his breath and thought to himself, Even if he succeeds, I won’t be under Gardner Martin’s control; I’ll be manipulated by the power of this place. Isn’t he worried that something might go wrong?

The abnormality here is connected to the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Is he not concerned about that?

With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian furrowed his brow and asked Termiboros, “Since I won’t be affected or altered abnormally, will Gardner Martin notice something off about me when I leave tomorrow morning?”

Termiboros’s voice boomed.

“If such a level of corruption was easily detectable, Gardner Martin and his allies would have been eliminated by the official Beyonders long ago.

“Unless the source of corruption provides direct information, they can’t tell that you’re unaffected.”

Hmm… As Lumian contemplated the situation, he suddenly realized a hidden truth in Termiboros’s words—Gardner Martin and the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order were already corrupted!

They were under someone else’s control!

Hiss… The more Lumian thought about it, the more he found it terrifying.

After a few seconds, Lumian tried to get more information from Termiboros, asking, “When I meet Gardner Martin, how should I display my fanaticism, and which beliefs should I reject?”

Termiboros surprisingly replied, “Show fanaticism towards war and chaos and reject belief in other deities.”

Lumian nodded, but another concern arose. “Considering the intensity of the recent abnormality, shouldn’t everyone who enters and stays here be corrupted?”

Termiboros clarified, “Only two specific pathways inevitably trigger the abnormality here. The rest require specific actions at precise times before the anomaly will occur. The officials only recognize the latter situation and secretly prevent others from entering this building at those specific times.”

“Two special pathways… Hunter and Demoness?” Lumian could roughly guess.

Termiboros didn’t deny it.

As Lumian recalled the entire incident, he couldn’t help but smile, saying, “Termiboros, it seems you’ve truly understood your situation and positioned yourself wisely.”

Termiboros remained silent this time, providing no response.

In the following hours, Lumian encountered two more abnormalities. One almost broke his neck, while the other caused an explosion that sent his organs flying.

Remembering the words “don’t respond,” he endured the trials, eventually returning to his unharmed body.

Finally, a tinge of reddish-gold appeared on the horizon as the sun rose. Lumian stood up, basking in the morning light for a moment before leaving 13 Avenue du Marché.

There, he saw Gardner Martin sitting in a carriage opposite. Their eyes met, and in the next moment, Gardner Martin smiled.

Lumian smiled back.

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Chapter 282 - 282 Treacherous

282 Treacherous

Gardner Martin stepped out of the carriage and warmly embraced Lumian.

Oh, his attitude changed instantly… Lumian criticized as he returned the hug. After the embrace, Gardner Martin let go and smiled, declaring, “From now on, we’re true brothers.”

True brothers? Can I inherit your estate if you die? Lumian, whose mental state had improved significantly and had successfully passed the difficult “test,” held back his teasing thoughts.

“You’re still my boss,” Lumian said, his habitual loyalty shining through in his words.

He thought that while it might have been a bit over the top, the gesture didn’t feel insincere or out of place.

Gardner Martin laughed.

“In the future, when there’s nobody else around, you can call me ‘CO Sir.’”

“CO Sir…” Lumian found the title a little strange.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order was a secret organization, not an army.

Gardner Martin didn’t offer any explanation; he just smiled.

“Come to 11 Rue des Fontaines at 8 p.m. tonight. That’s when your initiation ritual will take place.”

With that, he gave Lumian’s shoulder a reassuring pat.

“Rest well now.”

Lumian acknowledged his words with a nod and bid farewell to the boss of the Savoie Mob. He made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré and drew the curtains of Room 207.

It was already past 6 a.m., so Lumian didn’t need to catch up on sleep. He sat at the wooden table and began writing to Madam Magician. He recounted the previous night’s encounter and Termiboros’s performance. Finally, he inquired about how to report this matter to Mr. K.

Alone, Lumian couldn't avoid the peculiar "abnormality" in the abandoned building. He needed to explain the situation convincingly to Mr. K without revealing that he possessed The Fool's seal and an angel from the Inevitability domain.

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian set up a ritual and summoned the "doll" messenger in the light-gold dress.

The messenger lowered her head and nodded with satisfaction upon seeing the square-shaped letter.

As she levitated the letter, she warned Lumian, "Someone is still monitoring you."

Huh? I didn't notice it at all… His tracking, concealment, and observation skills are impressive… Lumian prided himself on being a skilled Hunter with strong anti-tracking abilities. Yet, he had failed to detect the presence of the monitors!

Mr. K's subordinates? No, if Miss Messenger felt the need to warn me, it couldn't be the Aurora Order… The monitors sent by Gardner Martin must still be lurking, even after passing the test and facing that abnormal corruption last night. I've let my guard down after being informed about my induction, and that's made me vulnerable… Damn, how cunning! Lumian realized he had been too naive and not cautious enough compared to Gardner Martin.

If he hadn't pretended to be exhausted from sleep deprivation and torture, drawing the curtains to sleep would've been an obvious red flag. It would have definitely raised suspicion among the monitors.

At the same time, Lumian was grateful that Madam Magician's messenger seemed powerful enough not to be detected by the monitors.

After sending off the "doll" messenger, Lumian lay on the bed, waiting for a reply. When it finally arrived, he read the message carefully.

"As a secret organization with a history spanning two to three centuries, the Iron and Blood Cross Order doesn't recruit members so readily. The fact that they are allowing new members to be corrupted goes against the test I know of.

"It appears that the Iron and Blood Cross Order has undergone some negative changes over the years. Don't rush to uncover the reasons behind this just yet. Take it step by step and focus on protecting yourself for now.

"When Termiboros offered help and warned you, it was likely because He didn't want you to be corrupted or perish outright. That would have an impact on Him. At the same time, He probably wants to earn your trust before revealing His true intentions at a critical moment.

"Always remember that an evil god's angel is a true madman. He will surely bring disaster to you and those around you. Stay vigilant at all times. You must both use Him to your advantage and guard against His treachery.

“As for Mr. K, it’s simple. Just explain that you recited that entity’s honorific name at a crucial moment, and miraculously, you remained untainted.

“Don’t worry about him verifying the authenticity of your claim with that entity. Devout believers wouldn’t do such a thing. Besides, even the entity Himself might not be certain if He responded to your prayers.”

Wh— Lumian felt a bit bewildered by the last part.

How could a deity not know if He had responded to a specific believer?

Isn’t that too absurd?

In an instant, Lumian recalled something Madam Magician had once told him.

If he used anything other than the three-line honorific name to pray to Mr. Fool, she couldn’t guarantee that the response would be from that great being. It could be very dangerous.

Something similar to this situation? Matters involving deities are truly unfathomable. And any mistake could lead to a situation more tragic than death… Could Aurore have faced the same problem? Lumian’s thoughts drifted.

For the past few days, he had meticulously combed through Aurore’s grimoires, copying everything from the two highlighted time periods that Madame Justice had pointed out. His plan was to show it to the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Madam Hela, when the opportunity arose.

Franca had already read through the corresponding content and found no suspicious details. The unconventional mysticism knowledge was just ordinary spells that could only be cast by a Warlock or Beyonder of the corresponding domain. Neither of them could practice it.

The only issue they found was that since the beginning of the year, Aurore’s grimoires had gained a significant amount of ritualistic knowledge related to sacrificial rituals and secret deeds. These were obtained from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but they didn’t point to any evil god or hidden existence. They were more basic applications.

A crimson flame engulfed the letter, turning it to ash in Lumian’s hand.

He lay down and pretended to sleep, but his mind was busy contemplating the grimoires and planning his next steps.

The most important thing to him was that the one-month deadline set by the Prophecy Spell was approaching. Guillaume Bénet, the padre, would appear somewhere in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge.

…

In the hill district, at the entrance of Deep Valley Cloister.

Franca, dressed as a typical bounty hunter with a fake mustache and a top hat, sighed to Jenna,

“There’s really no clue at all.”

Jenna was disguised in a white shirt, brown vest, dark pants, and black boots, with a brown beret. She had altered her features slightly to look more ordinary, without any moles or smoky makeup.

As they gazed at the peculiar iron-black building with steel components and massive chimneys resembling steeples, it felt more like a special factory than the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery cloister.

At that moment, white smoke billowed from the chimneys, accompanied by a loud mechanical roar.

“It’s mainly because those monks don’t want to interact with outsiders…” Jenna replied, feeling frustrated.

For the past few days, they, like other bounty hunters and private detectives, were only allowed to enter the first-floor courtyard. They could only inquire with the new gatekeeper and a few other servants.

The ascetic monks only provided a list of relevant personnel’s statements.

Franca diverted her gaze and clicked her tongue.

“This won’t be an easy case. Otherwise, the official Beyonders would have figured it out by now.

“Since we can’t find any clues in the cloister, let’s take a look around.”

“Alright.” Jenna lacked experience in such investigations and was still learning from Franca.

They strolled around the cloister in the valley, occasionally encountering other investigators drawn by the high bounty.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, they came across a mountain wall showing signs of collapse and new trees growing.

On the side of the mountain wall, there was a cave sealed by a heavy wooden door. A man in his forties sat beside it, seeking shelter from the wind and rain.

He flipped through old newspapers with comic strips, occasionally chuckling. A brass key hung from his waist.

Franca approached and asked in a deliberate hoarse voice, “What’s this place?”

The plain-looking, slightly ragged man glanced up at Franca's face and frowned a bit.

His gaze quickly shifted to Jenna, and he seemed more at ease.

"This is the entrance to the Deep Valley Quarry.

"I'm a gatekeeper."

"Why is there a door, and why is it locked?" Jenna had seen a real quarry south of the market district.

"This place is abandoned and could collapse anytime. We can't allow anyone daring enough to disturb a sleeping tiger," the gatekeeper of the Deep Valley Quarry explained with a smile.

"Is this place not connected to Underground Trier?" Franca inquired.

The quarry's gatekeeper shook his head.

"It's on the verge of complete collapse. How could it be connected? I'm about to lose my job!"

With that, he looked at Jenna and tried to be friendly.

"Do you want some work? I'll pay you to have some fun with me—just once."

"You Trierians…" Franca tutted and shook her head.

Jenna responded with her usual catchphrase, rejecting his proposition.

…

8 p.m., 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Lumian followed Gardner Martin's butler, Faustino, across the lawn and through the hall until they reached a windowless room.

Inside, there was a dining table, but it didn't resemble a lavish villa restaurant. Instead, it appeared quite plain, almost empty.

Lumian glanced around and noticed three rows of dishes neatly arranged on the table. The first row held various utensils, the second row contained cups and bottles, and the third row displayed prepared dishes and unlit candles.

The setup was meticulously symmetrical, forming three parallel lines.

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Chapter 283 - 283 Idea

283 Idea

Gardner Martin's butler, Faustino, didn't leave the room after guiding Lumian in. Instead, he opened his arms with a smile.

"Welcome, new brother."

You're also a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order? Lumian was taken aback at first, but then he accepted it as a matter of fact.

A butler, as the master's eyes, ears, and limbs, likely knew many of Gardner Martin's secrets. So it made sense that he either promoted Faustino to be a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order or had a member of the Order become his butler.

Lumian observed Faustino's slightly gray temples, sunken eyes, and light-blue eyes, then embraced him warmly.

"Thank you."

Faustino, dressed in his butler attire, went to the dining table and pulled out a chair at the west end, saying to Lumian, "Sit here."

Lumian nodded and settled down, feeling strangely at home.

Of course, thanks to Aurore's education, he had avoided the habit of raising his legs and crossing them at the edge of the dining table.

Faustino seated himself beside Lumian and briefly explained, "A few more brothers will come later."

Fifteen minutes later, the rest of the Iron and Blood Cross Order members arrived. Following Faustino's introductions, Lumian embraced each one.

They were:

Vincent Lorraine, representing Gardner Martin in the Rist dock operations, was under 30 years old with a typical Intis look—black hair, blue eyes, refined appearance, and slender figure. He didn't strike Lumian as a Beyonder of the Hunter pathway as he didn't differ much from ordinary white-collar workers, but that begged the question—how did he survive the vigil?

Parsifal, who helped Gardner Martin manage the depot and freight company, appeared as an average middle-aged man with slightly disheveled brown hair and amiable brown eyes when he smiled. However, his emotionless gaze gave Lumian chills, making him wary.

Not in charge of specific matters, Albus seemed to operate in the dark and had a hint of red in his hair. His sharp brown eyebrows and eyes made him rather handsome, but he had a less likable appearance.

There was also an acquaintance of Lumian's, "Blood Palm" Black of the Savoie Mob.

As the manager of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he was dressed formally, had brown hair and blue eyes, and enjoyed a cigar with a warm smile.

Lumian had suspected that the Savoie Mob had an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order secretly monitoring the market district and their activities. However, he hadn't expected it to be "Blood Palm" Black, who didn't stand out at all.

Lumian had initially thought it might be Baron Brignais or "Rat" Christo, but it turned out differently.

Strangely, Black bore a resemblance to Gardner Martin.

With Faustino and Lumian, there were now six members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order present.

In the past, Lumian had criticized, "Isn't it too much for a regional mob like the Savoie Mob to have five or six Beyonders?" But now, he found it unsurprising.

As a secret organization with a long history, it was normal for the Iron and Blood Cross Order to have such influence and heritage. Even its subsidiaries enjoyed abundant resources.

After exchanging pleasantries, Butler Faustino introduced the items on the table to Lumian.

"In the ensuing ritual, the goblets will be our weapons. They can also be used as cannons. Red wine will be ordinary explosives, white wine will be potent explosives, food will be the components, and knives and forks will be sharp swords…"

Lumian listened quietly, wondering if there was something odd about their thinking.

Are they too self-aware?

Or is there some mystical significance to this?

By the time Faustino finished speaking, Gardner Martin, now wearing his tailcoat and an Iron Cross medal embedded with a ruby over his chest, entered the room.

He stood on the east side of the long dining table, facing the six seated members on the west side.

With a swoosh, the five members, excluding Lumian, stood up in unison.

Oh… Lumian inwardly sighed as he rose to his feet.

“Good evening, CO Sir.” Faustino, Black, and the others greeted him in unison. Lumian was slightly slower to respond.

Gardner Martin motioned for everyone to take their seats and smiled.

“We’ll officially begin the ritual when the Supervisor arrives.

“Ciel, let me tell you what the core you’re about to join represents.”

Gardner Martin locked eyes with Lumian, his tone growing more serious.

“We are all members of a secretive organization with a history spanning centuries.

“It’s known as the Iron and Blood Cross Order.”

Lumian didn’t show any intentional surprise or dismay. After all, the name sounded rather ordinary.

Albus, the young man with dark-red hair sitting at the edge of the dining table, seemed about to speak, but Gardner Martin shot him a stern look.

The Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order turned his attention back to Lumian.

“Nearly 300 years ago, a few influential figures established the Iron and Blood Cross Order. They believed that deities were merely powerful Beyonders, and no matter how you look at it, even the weakest Beyonder is fundamentally different from ordinary people.

“Our philosophy is that regardless of how one obtains Beyonder powers, they should be recognized and treated with a status above ordinary people. However, the two Churches and the government only acknowledge the Beyonders they nurture. They also insist that supernatural powers should be concealed from ordinary folks as much as possible.

“This goes against nature and the course of history. We must change it.

“This also means we have to oppose the government and the two Churches, but there’s no need to fear. We possess sufficient strength and true demigods.

“In the future, if the two Churches are willing to accept wild Beyonders and acknowledge their statuses, we might consider cooperating with them.”

In other words, the ultimate goal is to overthrow the government and establish a country where Beyonders hold positions at all levels? Lumian interpreted Gardner Martin’s words from his own perspective.

Gardner Martin glanced at the six members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order seated opposite him and smiled once more.

“Our Iron and Blood Cross Order’s strength is mainly concentrated in Intis, with over a third of our members based in Trier. As you can see, we have many powerful brothers in the market district alone, and even more Beyonders under our control.

“I am the CO, or Commanding Officer, responsible for leading you and handling various matters in the market district. Above me are several branch presidents, also referred to as ‘Deputy Brigade Commanders.’ Each of them is a true and powerful demigod.

“Above the branch presidents is our Iron and Blood Cross Order’s president, also known as the Brigade Commander. He is a mysterious and formidable figure.

“Below me are NCOs. When we have more than ten brothers in the market district, I’ll appoint two NCOs to assist me in management. NCOs receive additional resources and support.”

Is this some kind of military game? Lumian guessed from the titles of the different levels within the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Gardner Martin turned his gaze to the door and spoke, “Apart from that, we also have many Supervisors. Each Supervisor acts independently and patrols the areas under the jurisdiction of different commanding officers.

“In the future, if anything happens to me and I exhibit any abnormalities, you must find the Supervisor immediately and report the situation to him. Similarly, if you discover that the Supervisor has done something abnormal, inform me immediately.”

Gardner Martin grinned playfully at Lumian and said, “Ciel, let me introduce you to Olson, the Supervisor in charge of the market district.”

Perplexed, Lumian followed Gardner Martin’s finger and looked at the door.

In the next moment, a tall, thin man in a blue vest and black suit entered the room.

The man had short auburn hair, reddish-brown eyes, thick eyebrows, and a wild beard. He resembled a famished bear.

As Lumian recognized Supervisor Olson, his pupils widened.

It was the trader he, Christo, and Simon had encountered underground!

Lumian vividly remembered that he had been nothing but a head and a blood-stained spine. He had been pursued by another headless monster, both of which were extremely dangerous. Yet, here he was, underground and appearing at Gardner Martin's house!

Lumian couldn't help but glance at Olson's hands, noticing his fair skin and the small suitcase he carried.

He has a body again? Has he merged with the headless monster? Lumian's mind raced as he observed Olson approaching Gardner Martin.

He began to suspect that the two monsters they had encountered during the transaction were illusions created by Olson. There was nothing abnormal about him.

Since the transaction had been a test, it wasn't surprising that the monster had been fake.

But was it not too realistic? Lumian watched with suspicion as Gardner Martin and Olson each took a goblet and addressed everyone present, "Load the explosives!"

Albus, Parsifal, and the other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order placed a goblet in front of them and poured alluring red wine into them.

So this is how you load explosives? Lumian recalled Faustino's words about goblets being weapons or cannons, and wine being explosives.

After filling the "cannons" with "explosives," Gardner Martin called out, "Attention!

"Port arms!"

In an instant, everyone stood up and placed their right hands on the goblets filled with red wine.

"Present arms!" Gardner Martin gave another command.

In unison, he raised the goblet to his chest.

Lumian marveled and followed suit, imitating the actions of the other members around him.

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Chapter 284 - 284 Entering the Order

284 Entering the Order

Gardner Martin observed the Iron and Blood Cross Order members opposite him and nodded with satisfaction.

“Aim!”

At this command, Faustino and the others raised their goblets to their lips.

Is this what aiming means? Lumian almost laughed, but the seriousness of the other Iron and Blood Cross Order members stopped him.

He had grasped the essence of the ritual and had an idea of what would happen next.

Just then, Gardner Martin issued a new order.

“Fire!”

Almost simultaneously, Parsifal, Black, and the others downed a third of the red wine in their goblets.

“Fire!”

Gardner Martin called out the word again.

Lumian lifted his head slightly and downed another third of the red wine.

Gardner Martin followed suit.

He then continued, “Attack!”

The Iron and Blood Cross Order members present finished the remaining red wine.

Gardner Martin removed the goblet from his mouth with a serious expression.

“Ground arms!”

As he spoke, he raised the goblet above his eyes, pressed it against his forehead, and then placed it back on the dining table.

Vincent Lorraine and the others followed suit.

Then, they straightened their backs, slapped their left chests with their right hands, and shouted together, “War! War! War!”

As they shouted in unison, Lumian felt a subtle shift in the room’s atmosphere, as if it had been filled with enthusiasm, excitement, and passion.

The atmosphere infected the Iron and Blood Cross Order members, connecting their hearts and minds, making them feel like true brothers.

Even without being influenced by any abnormality or fanatical thoughts, Lumian couldn’t help but be affected by the environment and atmosphere. He felt a surge of excitement[1].

He had previously criticized the initiation ritual of the Iron and Blood Cross Order for lacking mystique and not living up to the title of a secret organization. Now, he realized that it was merely different in quality from the Aurora Order.

Besides, the more mystical part was the vigil at 13 Avenue du Marché.

Gardner Martin gestured with his right hand, prompting Faustino, Albus, and the others to stop and fall silent.

He smiled once again and said, “Let us welcome our new brother, Lumian Lee!”

This time, he used Lumian’s real name, indicating that the Iron and Blood Cross Order knew the members’ situations very well.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order members, including Supervisor Olson, applauded one after another. Lumian stood up and poured himself a goblet of red wine, which he downed in one gulp as a sign of respect.

This fully showcased his characteristics as a regular customer of Ol’ Tavern.

“Very good. We’re all brothers. There’s no need to stand on ceremony,” Gardner said as he took a seat. While Faustino distributed plates and cut bread, Gardner smiled and continued, “I’ve already explained the history and philosophy of our Iron and Blood Cross Order. Now, let’s talk about what we want to do.”

His smile vanished as he grew more serious.

“The most important thing we’ve always been working towards is to overthrow the current government, establish a country ruled by Beyonders, and transform this world. For this, we’ve been plotting and experimenting. We’ve established multiple branch organizations to prepare for chaos.

“Specifically, as for me, I’ll use companies and mobs to control dockworkers, construction workers, porters, handymen, and laborers in the market district. When necessary, I’ll let them take to the streets and use barricades to fight the police and army.”

Lumian furrowed his brow and asked in confusion, “Isn’t it said that Beyonders are fundamentally different from ordinary people? Beyonders are superior to ordinary people. Why make controlling and using workers a goal?”

He found it ironic that the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s philosophy and actions were completely inconsistent.

Although this could be considered normal—concepts were concepts and slogans were slogans—and they couldn’t be equated to reality, Gardner Martin could always address these matters at a later time. It didn’t feel right for his words to contradict himself just seconds later.

If he hadn’t just joined this secret organization, Lumian’s tone would have been even more mocking.

Gardner Martin grinned.

“Very perceptive. You’ve noticed a very important problem.

“Before this, only Albus suggested it. Everyone else naturally accepted it.”

Not only is he using ordinary people to create chaos, but he also has other intentions? Lumian turned his head to glance at Albus, who was sitting at the edge of the dining table. He realized that the dark-red-haired young man’s posture was rather casual. His right leg was crossed, and he kept shaking his ankle.

Gardner Martin explained simply, “First, you need to understand something. Why did those deities establish Churches and spread Their teachings?

“You probably don’t buy the words ‘God loves the world.’ If They truly had love, the market district wouldn’t be like this, and Intis wouldn’t have so many tramps.”

Lumian agreed with this. He nodded slightly and didn’t interrupt the Commanding Officer.

Gardner Martin smiled and said, “We reckon that deities require believers, and we’ve proven this over the centuries.

“The more common folk we influence, the greater our resources to strike fear into the hearts of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. This’ll weaken their support for the current government and boost our chances during the riots.

“Eventually, it’ll become a crucial bargaining chip to make them agree to us, if not outright support us.”

“They’re all just bargaining chips…” Lumian’s eyes flickered.

The people he knew and interacted with were distinct individuals—unique families.

Gardner Martin let out a sigh.

“If we aim to control more workers and citizens, we need the government and the National Convention to cooperate with us.

“I’ve always known what kind of person Hugues Artois is and the forces behind him, but I still decided to support his bid for parliament. I knew he’d inevitably create plenty of chaos in the market district. Being associated with the National Convention and the government, the worse he performed, the more people would flock to our side. Unfortunately, this piece of trash was assassinated just a few days after being elected.”

So, that’s why the Savoie Mob supports Hugues Artois… I thought there was an evil god backing you, and the evil gods all support Hugues Artois… Lumian realized.

Without Gardner Martin’s personal explanation and a proper understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s philosophy, Lumian couldn’t possibly fathom the secret organization’s true intentions behind supporting Hugues Artois’s candidacy for parliament.

Gardner Martin summarized, “Hence, in the market district, we place great importance on docks, depots, warehouses, freight companies, and construction firms. The Savoie Mob’s purpose is to interact with various individuals and gather crucial information, all while contributing to the organization’s funds.

“Naturally, mobs also serve as a vital tool to control ordinary people.”

No wonder he poured so many resources into the Savoie Mob… Lumian glanced at the intense “Blood Glove” Black and inwardly mocked him for being better at acting than himself.

Haven’t you heard the Boss’s words countless times? Why are you still looking so focused?

Look at Albus, constantly eating, drinking, and shaking his leg.

After Lumian nodded, Gardner Martin took a sip of red wine and said, “One more thing we’re doing is exploring the underground to find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier.”

Lumian couldn’t help but glance at the silent Supervisor Olson.

The lanky man, looking like a hungry bear, was slicing a medium-rare steak and devouring the juicy meat.

Lumian’s eyes scanned Olson’s neck several times, but there were no signs of sutures.

Could it be that the state of having only his head and spine is just an illusion created by some power? Lumian wondered to himself.

However, this was in line with the legend of Bansy Harbor!

Either Olson has a deep understanding of the unforeseen events in Bansy Harbor, or he encountered similar monsters elsewhere…

Even if it's an illusion, it can't be something he imagined. It must be based on his experience and knowledge…

Madam Magician said most of his words were likely true. She even suspected that he disappeared for a few months because he entered Fourth Epoch Trier…

Where did he encounter a monster with only its head and spine?

If he already entered Fourth Epoch Trier, why is Gardner Martin still searching for the entrance? Is Madam Magician's suspicion off? Lumian's thoughts raced as he made a series of guesses.

Looking at Gardner Martin, he asked in confusion, "Why search for Fourth Epoch Trier's entrance?"

Gardner Martin grinned.

"To other Beyonders, it's hell, an abyss. It's a calamity they can't approach, but to Hunters, it represents a massive treasure trove.

"And our Iron and Blood Cross Order is dominated by Beyonders of the Hunter pathway."

"A treasure trove?" Lumian thought of the Tree of Shadow and the invisible sea of flames that could incinerate a portion of the tree roots.

Gardner Martin continued, speaking solemnly, "I don't know how much you know about the history of the Fourth Epoch, but I can tell you that in that era, deities once walked the earth, and angels often appeared. It was known as the Age of the Gods.

"In the Northern Continent, there were three powerful countries during the Age of the Gods, and one of them was the Tudor Empire. Its capital, Trier, had sunk underground.

"The Tudor Empire's Emperor, Alista Tudor, was known as the Blood Emperor. He was a true deity who controlled the Hunter pathway!

"He perished in a battle of gods. His remains are in Fourth Epoch Trier!"

Blood Emperor Tudor's remains? Lumian instantly recalled some of the contents of Aurore's grimoires. Aurore didn't delve deeply into the history of the Fourth

Epoch, only having a rough understanding. She mentioned the Solomon Empire, the Trunsoest Empire, and the Tudor Empire. She also mentioned titles like the Blood Emperor, the Night Emperor, the Emperor of the Underworld, the Black Emperor, and the War of the Four Emperors.

According to Aurore's description, the Blood Emperor was as powerful as a deity.

[1] Adapted from a ritual conducted by the Les Neuf S?urs.

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Chapter 285 - 285 Maxim

285 Maxim

The Blood Emperor's remains, the remains of a deity… Does it hold the Beyonder characteristic of Sequence 0? No wonder the Iron and Blood Cross Order dreams of entering Fourth Epoch Trier…

But what's this got to do with me? As a Sequence 7, I don't even dare think about becoming a demigod. Advancing to a Sequence 6 Conspirer is beyond my consideration for now. All I can focus on is digesting the Pyromaniac potion. I've got nothing better to do than contemplate High-Sequences or deity-related items!

Besides, Madam Magician warned that such items always come with negative effects. Tsk, negative effects involving godhood can easily kill me…

Lumian, with vast knowledge of high-end mysticism, remained unfazed by Gardner Martin's provocation. Thoughts raced through his mind, and he sneered inwardly.

Looking at Gardner Martin, he asked innocently, "If Fourth Epoch Trier truly contains the remains of The Blood Emperor Tudor, why didn't the Eternal Blazing Sun and God of Steam and Machinery Church take it away instead of leaving it for our Iron and Blood Cross Order?

"Even if only Hunters can enter safely, it's just a matter of time before they nurture a High-Sequence Hunter with the resources they have. The Fifth Epoch has been around for over 1,300 years."

Gardner Martin fell silent for two seconds before responding, "There are other factors restraining them, but they won't be a problem for us.

"I'll tell you all the details once we find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier."

Isn't that just saying, "I don't know why, but we have to give it a try?" Uh, maybe the Boss knows the reason, but he's afraid of scaring us if he reveals it. He can't directly tell the present members that there are many dangers hidden underground that even deities can't resolve—the kind that requires rebuilding a Trier above the Fourth Epoch ruins as a seal. That's why the two Churches won't attempt to enter. Heh heh, who would dare to go underground when they're not seriously corrupted? Lumian tried his best to control his gaze and posture, so as not to show any air of superiority.

Compared to the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order here, him having a rough understanding of the underground situation and having seen the Invisible

Sea of Fire, the Tree of Shadow, and the bizarre catacombs indeed made him qualified to be superior.

Of course, he had no idea how well Commanding Officer Gardner Martin and Supervisor Olson knew about the underground situation.

Perhaps the latter, suspected to have entered Fourth Epoch Trier, knew more secrets.

Gardner Martin didn't continue discussing the Blood Emperor and the Fourth Epoch. Instead, he turned to Lumian and asked, "Is there anything you need these days?"

Oh, are you about to hand out the membership perks? Lumian's spirits lifted as he replied with sincerity, "I'm in need of a mystical item with peculiar properties to compensate for my deficiencies in Beyonder powers.

"And if there are no relevant mystical items available, perhaps you could provide me with the corresponding Beyonder… ingredients. I'll try to find an Artisan to craft them."

He had almost mentioned the term "Beyonder characteristics" but quickly changed it to "Beyonder ingredients" after a pause, feigning embarrassment.

Though people often spoke of Beyonder characteristics at Trier's mysticism gathering, they usually referred to the fusion of two main potion ingredients.

Of course, some people had long discovered that Beyonders were also Beyonder creatures, capable of producing ingredients for potion concoction, hinting at the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility.

Typically, Lumian's mention of Beyonder characteristics wouldn't attract suspicion or attention, but he needed to be cautious not to arouse suspicion from a Conspirer like Gardner Martin.

"Heh, you really dare to ask?" Albus mocked Lumian, shaking his feet with crossed legs.

Even Parsifal, Vincent Lorraine, and the others wore strange expressions.

None of them had dared to make such a bold request when they joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Undeterred, Lumian sneered back at Albus, "Why not? I'm not like some piece of trash who can't handle a reward. What the organization gives me today, I'll repay tenfold in the future!"

With a whoosh, Albus lowered his right leg and glared at Lumian with fiery intensity, clearly displeased with his response.

The others, except for Faustino who maintained his butler demeanor, also showed discontent.

Lumian's snide remark had included them as well.

"Enough," Gardner Martin intervened, smiling at Lumian. "As the Commanding Officer, I must be fair. I can't grant you a mystical item right now, as others will protest. But don't worry; our Iron and Blood Cross Order is not stingy. Once you complete a few missions and accumulate enough merit, I'll provide you with a few mystical items to choose from.

"Meanwhile, before each mission, suitable mystical items will be temporarily provided to the participating members, ensuring their safety and mission completion."

Lumian nodded, accepting the response. He hadn't expected much, but he still made the request in case Gardner Martin was in a generous mood.

After a brief consideration, Gardner Martin added, "I'll inform René that the advance you received was my reward to you. You'll still get your share from Salle de Bal Brise in the future."

"Thank you, CO Sir," Lumian expressed his joy openly.

This meant his membership door gift was 12,000 verl d'or, a significant sum.

Hence, most of the money he spent on advancing to Pyromaniac came from the Aurora Order and the Iron and Blood Cross Order's "financing." His gratitude was genuine, as he had only contributed less than a third of the expenses himself.

Gardner Martin cut into a medium steak, chewing and swallowing before asking, "Any other questions?"

Deliberately, Lumian inquired, "How can I quickly master the Pyromaniac potion?"

He wanted to see if the acting method was common knowledge within the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Gardner Martin chuckled and replied, "That's an excellent question.

"To master a potion, you need to start with its name. Get close to it, understand it, and embody it. In addition, I have to tell you a maxim: flames can both incinerate others and harm yourself."

Lumian listened attentively and got a rough idea of the situation.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order kept the precise interpretation of the acting method hidden from ordinary members, using vague descriptions, regulations, warnings, and maxims to guide them without revealing everything.

This approach allowed ordinary members to avoid certain risks while gradually gaining insights by sticking close to the potion's name. They could speed up their progress but couldn't fully grasp a more suitable acting principle for themselves,

In other words, it was easier for them to "master" the potion than wild Beyonders and advance in shorter periods. However, other than the talented, those who stuck close to the acting requirements couldn't compare to Beyonders who knew the acting method.

Lumian suspected that he would only learn the entire acting method once he became an NCO and received greater attention from the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

He believed that such a secretive organization spanning centuries must possess the acting method.

In contrast, Madam Magician of the Tarot Club had already given him extensive high-end mysticism knowledge, including the acting method.

As for Mr. K, Lumian was unsure if he had forgotten to teach the method due to devotion to his prayers and work or if he believed Lumian would naturally encounter it at the Iron and Blood Cross Order and exposing him to this knowledge too early would put him at risk of exposure.

"Pyromaniac is all about setting fires! Just go to the National Convention building and set it ablaze. You'll master the potion in no time," Albus taunted Lumian, pushing the matter.

Lumian scoffed and replied, "I'm a Pyromaniac, not an Arsonist. Meaningless acts of arson will only harm myself."

Albus sneered, "How do you know it's meaningless? Burning is the meaning."

Lumian clicked his tongue.

"Then why don't I burn your hair too?"

After engaging each other for a while in an argumentative manner, Gardner Martin intervened in the conversation, which was becoming increasingly meaningless and close to a personal attack.

Lumian shifted the conversation to probe the Iron and Blood Cross Order's knowledge of the underground.

"I went to the catacombs some time ago and sensed something amiss, but I couldn't figure out what it was. CO Sir, do you know anything about it?"

Gardner Martin glanced at Supervisor Olson beside him and finally replied, "That has nothing to do with our actions. You don't need to know.

“All I can say is that the danger lurking there is as serious as that in the Fourth Epoch Trier.”

Lumian nodded thoughtfully and continued asking questions while enjoying the delicacies.

During the process, he noticed that Vincent Lorraine remained relatively quiet, and Parsifal and “Blood Palm” Black were amiable but guarded with their words, revealing little valuable information. Faustino seemed to play the role of a butler instead of the secret organization’s official member.

Only the dark-red-haired Albus, despite his malicious and mocking comments, gave Lumian some useful insights.

By 10 p.m., the initiation concluded, and Lumian was the last to leave 11 Rue des Fontaines, boarding the carriage belonging to Salle de Bal Brise.

As the carriage moved, Lumian’s heart skipped a beat as he looked up at the seat opposite him. At some point in time, another person had joined him—Supervisor Olson, who looked like a hungry bear.

The trader who played the underground monster!

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Chapter 286 - 286 Magic Mirror Divination

286 Magic Mirror Divination

Ignoring Lumian's tense state, Olson spoke in a deep, raspy voice, "As per tradition, I must speak to you in private as Supervisor."

Lumian let out a relieved breath. "About what?"

Olson placed the brown suitcase beside his left leg.

"If you discover anything suspicious about your Commanding Officer, Gardner Martin, or any abnormal occurrences, report them to me immediately."

That's only right. A spot will be vacated only if something happens to the Boss… Lumian thought silently with a hint of mockery before asking, "How do I contact you?"

Olson looked into Lumian's eyes and said, "Leave the information in the basement of 13 Avenue du Marché."

13 Avenue du Marché… The Iron and Blood Cross Order is indeed linked to the burned-down building… Olson might have entered Fourth Epoch Trier and is likely seriously corrupted. Does he have a way to exploit the anomaly at 13 Avenue du Marché? Lumian recalled the previous night and felt that Supervisor Olson was even more mysterious than Commanding Officer Gardner Martin.

He suspected that Olson was secretly monitoring his movements at 13 Avenue du Marché. Gardner Martin was clearly unwilling to enter unless necessary.

Combined with the burning of 13 Avenue du Marché over a decade ago, Mr. K had mentioned that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had drifted from the other organizations that believed in that entity in recent years. Madam Magician had mentioned that the current vigil ritual wasn't the Iron and Blood Cross Order's usual test. Lumian vaguely formulated an incomplete sequence of events in his mind.

He believed that 13 Avenue du Marché hadn't been burned down by the Iron and Blood Cross Order. However, they had subsequently discovered the secret there and suffered the corresponding corruption, evoking an abnormality.

Of course, it could be the other way around: perhaps some members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order had been corrupted elsewhere, allowing them to grasp the

anomaly at 13 Avenue du Marché.

“Alright.” Lumian nodded in agreement.

As Lumian’s mind raced with questions, he turned to Supervisor Olson, a look of puzzlement on his face.

“Was the trader I saw in the Albert Mines really you? Can your head leave your body and survive autonomously? Or was that an illusion you created?”

Olson let out a husky chuckle before responding, “Coincidentally, as Supervisor, I have three things to tell you. Firstly, what the eyes see may not be true. Secondly, we will eventually enter the Fourth Epoch’s Trier. It is an inevitability. And thirdly, don’t readily trust in the words of others.”

Don’t readily trust in the words of others… Interesting. Should I believe your first point? What I saw in the Albert Mines was actually real? Heh heh, it’s fine to talk about inevitability in front of me, but will Termiboros tolerate it? Lumian pondered, resisting the urge to place his right hand on his left chest.

Seeing Olson pick up the small brown suitcase again, Lumian couldn’t help but ask,

“What’s in there? Why do you keep carrying it?”

Olson smiled.

“If I were you, I’d pray I never find out the answer.”

With that, Supervisor Olson opened the carriage door and leaped into the darkness, disappearing instantly, without intentionally concealing himself as he had done when he first arrived.

“Acting all mysterious…” Lumian muttered under his breath.

Taking the carriage back to the bustling market district, he resisted the urge to hurry to Auberge du Coq Doré or the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches to contact Madam Magician’s messenger and report his official admission into the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Instead, he made his way to Salle de Bal Brise.

His concern grew as he suspected that the treacherous members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order might be taking advantage of his relaxed state to continue their final, clandestine surveillance.

Although they couldn’t locate Madam Magician’s messenger, Lumian knew better than to return to Room 207 or the safe house at this time; it would surely raise suspicions.

Taking a seat at the bar counter, Lumian ordered a glass of Kirsch. As he savored the drink, he immersed himself in the lively song and dance happening on the stage.

Jenna had the night off, and the performers tonight were two other Showy Divas and a male underground singer known for his high-energy songs.

…

Hill District, outside the Deep Valley Cloister.

Wearing a silver-white half-mask, Jenna regarded Franca, who had donned an assassin's outfit, with concern.

"What are we going to do tonight?

"Don't tell me you're thinking of infiltrating the cloister for an investigation?"

"Of course not!" Franca denied vehemently. "The Deep Valley Cloister is one of the most well-known cloisters of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. They have powerful Beyonders and hide mysterious artifacts crafted by Artisan monks. With our abilities, we'd only be walking into a trap… or worse."

Franca couldn't help her mind from wandering.

She had heard rumors that though the monks in the cloister were focused on steam and machinery and didn't marry or have children, it didn't mean they refrained from sex with others.

The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery didn't prohibit such interactions!

Some said that some monks would seek out street girls from time to time to relax, while others engaged in affairs with colleagues or men who sold their bodies.

There were still a large number of people who had mechanical fetishes or were truly undergoing ascetic training, capable of controlling themselves.

Of course, Trieriens tended to exaggerate and embellish these rumors with their own ideas. It likely strayed far from the truth. Franca didn't entirely believe it, but she couldn't dismiss it entirely either.

She believed that some monks might have such inclinations, but they were likely not the majority. Nonetheless, infiltrating a cloister as a wild Beyonder was dangerous. They could be accidentally killed by machinery, used as experimental subjects, or become playthings for a select few monks. The chances of success were slim.

In short, whether male or female, anyone below Sequence 4 or lacking enough confidence ought to forget about infiltrating the Deep Valley Cloister.

Behind her hood, Franca smiled and explained in a good mood, "We scoured the area today, but found no clues. But there's one place we haven't checked."

Jenna thought for a moment and asked, "That Deep Valley Quarry?"

“That’s right,” Franca affirmed with a grin. “Tonight, we’ll infiltrate it and conduct a search.”

In truth, she didn’t expect they would find anything since the official Beyonders had likely completed their investigations. Franca wanted to guide Jenna through the process and acquaint her with such matters.

“Okay.” Jenna nodded slightly.

Franca saw this as an opportunity to instruct her, “Before we officially infiltrate, there’s some preparatory work we must do.”

“For Assassins, it’s about familiarizing themselves with the environment, gathering information, and observing locations and routes. As for Witches, they must perform divinations beforehand.”

With that, Franca took out a palm-sized mirror she always carried.

Jenna immediately focused.

She had long been intrigued by mirror-related Witch abilities.

Previously, after she assassinated Hugues Artois and fled to Auberge du Coq Doré, Franca heard that she had left blood at the scene. Franca had swiftly used Mirror Substitution to sever the mystical connection between Jenna’s true self and the spilled blood.

Franca surveyed the area and spoke in hushed tones under the cover of evening shadows.

“When you become a Witch, you’ll naturally master Magic Mirror Divination and Staff Divination. Learning other divination methods is easy for Witches.

“The key to successful Magic Mirror Divination is choosing the right entity to pray to. The mystical symbol of the mirror connects you to an unknown being, and their answers can be obtained through this connection. However, if the unknown entity holds malice or is in a state of madness, they may influence the divination or provide a result that traps you, putting you in danger.

“When the time comes, I’ll give you a few relatively safe entities to pray to. These have been verified. Among them, the one with the most accurate divination results will require you to pay a corresponding price. Unless the matter is extremely critical and urgent, I usually avoid praying to him.”

“What price?” Jenna’s curiosity was piqued.

Franca cleared her throat awkwardly and said, “The price could lead to you experiencing social embarrassment or something not as severe, but it will certainly be uncomfortable.”

She recalled the first time she prayed to that entity for Magic Mirror Divination. In front of Madam Judgment, she was asked, “When you’re masturbating, do you occasionally fantasize about certain men and feel tempted to try new experiences?”

That question almost made her shatter the intermediary mirror. At the time, she had recently become a Witch and still identified fully as a man, even though her body had already transformed into a woman’s. It was natural that she would occasionally fantasize, but this revelation made her feel guilty and ashamed. Yet, she was forced to answer honestly in front of a demigod.

Even now, Franca couldn’t help but cringe at the memory, wanting to bury her head in the sand and avoid any recollection.

What was social death? This was it!

Franca believed that this incident had affected her when she subsequently approached Gardner Martin to give it a shot. This caused a crack in her psychological defense and make her give up on herself.

Embarrassment… Social death… Jenna understood the implication behind Franca’s words. Though Jenna had her thoughts, she chose not to voice them aloud.

Franca provided a brief explanation of Magic Mirror Divination, concluding with a demonstration. She gently caressed the surface of the mirror and recited the name of a safe entity.

As an aqueous light shimmered in the mirror, she posed a serious question, “Will exploring Trier’s Deep Valley Quarry tonight be dangerous?”

Since it was a question-based divination, the requirements for the statements weren’t too stringent.

Under Jenna’s curious and hopeful gaze, a deep, old voice emanated from the mirror, as if it had emerged from the depths of a river. “There is a certain level of danger.”

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Chapter 287 - 287 Key

287 Key

Franca finished the Magic Mirror Divination and then turned to Jenna, giving her interpretation of the answer.

“Normally, this means it’s dangerous, but we can handle it. If we’re careful, we should be fine.”

Jenna asked in surprise, “I thought the divination results would be straightforward.”

Surprisingly, such a brief sentence came with such a long explanation.

“It’s straightforward!” Franca emphasized with a smile. “If you visit the Divination Club in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative and find amateurs, their readings will be even vaguer. It makes it easier for them to interpret any result. Oh, have you never had anyone do divination for you before?”

Jenna nodded frankly.

Performing a divination cost a fortune!

Franca looked thoughtful, her eyes darting around.

“You can subscribe to Psychic, Lotus, Arcane, and Hidden Veil. While they have their problems and errors in specific applications, they offer valuable basic knowledge about mysticism.

“Ah, right. Ciel often buys those magazines. You can… Uh, I’ll help you borrow them!”

“Alright.” Jenna had only heard of mysticism magazines but had never bought one.

Having obtained satisfactory divination results, the duo, who had observed the route and surroundings during the day, swiftly arrived at the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry under the cover of the night.

The gatekeeper, who seemed to be in his forties, was sleeping in a small hut made of rocks. Wrapped in a dirty, old, and thin felt cloth, he leaned against the mountain wall.

Suddenly, a slender, smooth palm reached out from the shadow beside him, covering his mouth with a white handkerchief.

The gatekeeper didn't struggle. Within seconds, he went from slumbering to unconsciousness.

Franca, wearing a black hood, emerged from the shadows and clicked her tongue, sighing.

"The Bliss Society's sedative is really effective. It saves me a lot of trouble."

For this operation, she had borrowed Rentas's sedative from Lumian.

Jenna couldn't understand. "Couldn't we just knock him out?"

"That would work," Franca explained casually, "but that would leave traces. It won't be easy to make it seem like he's still asleep. Many bounty hunters and private detectives are involved in this mission. We shouldn't be the only ones targeting this quarry. So, it's better to be cautious and avoid leaving any loose ends."

Jenna, who had lived in Quartier du Jardin Botanique and the market district for many years, roughly understood Franca's point. She pondered for a moment and asked, "Are you worried that the bounty hunters and private detectives will have ill intentions if they find us entering the quarry ahead of them in the dead of night?"

Franca nodded, satisfied with her response.

"That's right. Many bounty hunters and private detectives switch to becoming bandits, robbers, and even murderers, depending on the situation and their surroundings.

"They take risks for money, not for justice. Since there are no leads for this mission and the current environment is suitable, it's in line with their style to steal from their peers and eliminate competition. After all, there's no one else here.

"Of course, with our strength, we don't have to fear bounty hunters and private detectives. But what if we make a similar mistake in another situation or face something more dangerous? That's why we have to be mindful from the beginning."

What Franca didn't say was that, being women, they might likely suffer more.

Jenna nodded slowly, agreeing with the reasoning.

She had seen criminals kill an old man living alone for just 5 verl d'or.

Franca smiled and teased, "Did you want me to knock him out to get back at him for asking if you wanted to join the street girl business this morning?"

“Dammit! Am I such a petty person?” Jenna couldn’t help but curse.

Whether it was during her years helping her mother with chores or when she was a local singer in the market district, she had been asked if she wanted to be involved in the street girl business so many times that she was used to it. She was a little angry, but not too much.

To show her magnanimity, Jenna exhaled and said, “When you use that sedative on others, it reminds me of what happened to me.”

She had also been drugged and nearly became a victim that disappeared. Fortunately, she had encountered Lumian.

Franca simply acknowledged her words.

“I understand your feelings, but since you’ve embarked on the path of the divine and intend to become stronger, you’ll have to use various means to deal with your enemies in the future. You can’t give up on a better option just because you feel a little repulsed.”

Jenna knew Franca had a point, but she couldn’t help asking, “Can’t a Beyonder lead a quiet, ordinary life without being drawn into conflicts and battles while protecting loved ones?”

“In the past, maybe it was feasible, but nowadays it’s exceedingly challenging. The more you advance, the harder it gets until it’s virtually impossible,” Franca replied with a sigh.

Jenna fell silent for a moment before saying, “Could it ever be possible in the distant future, I wonder?”

Franca glanced at the “slumbering” gatekeeper and answered, “That prominent figure once told me that such a life might be attainable at the end of the Fifth Epoch and the beginning of the Sixth Epoch, if there’s even a Sixth Epoch at all.”

Sixth Epoch… Those words made Jenna reflect for a few seconds before she burst into laughter at herself.

“I guess it’s just wishful thinking on my part. Achieving that kind of life is simply an illusion. At least, it is for me. With superpowers and a history of attempted assassination, I know I’d be unable to stand idly by if my family and friends faced hardship. I’d feel compelled to use my abilities to tackle problems that go beyond what the law and police can handle.”

Franca nodded in agreement. “That’s just the way it is.”

She hadn’t simply digested the Assassin and Instigator potions hoping her attire alone would do the trick, nor had she only encouraged her friends by instigating them.

Without much ado, Franca bent down and picked up the brass key from the gatekeeper.

“There’s just one door. Why are there so many keys? Are they all for his house?” Franca muttered as she exited the hut and walked toward the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry. She tried each key, one after the other.

In the end, she muttered to herself in shock and suspicion, “None of it is right…”

“None of them are right?” Jenna hadn’t expected such a possibility.

If not a single key could unlock the entrance to Deep Valley Quarry, what was the point of watching the door?

Franca said, partly instructing and partly thinking aloud, “Perhaps this set of keys is a decoy. The real key must be hidden somewhere else.”

She then said to Jenna, “Search the area. I’ll take a look at the gatekeeper.”

Jenna didn’t object. With her Night Vision, she began searching the nearby bushes and crevices starting from the hut.

Franca squatted beside the gatekeeper and meticulously searched his body from head to toe.

When she reached his crotch, she bent her finger and flicked it firmly. She sneered and whispered, “Jenna may not be petty, but I am!”

After their search, the two of them met at the heavy wooden door, shaking their heads to signal they had found nothing.

Franca clicked her tongue and said, “There’s definitely something wrong with this quarry.

“That guy is truly a gatekeeper. He’s only meant to watch the door but lacks the ability to open it!”

“Are we still going in?” Jenna asked hesitantly.

“I’ll give it another shot.” Franca extended her right hand to the copper lock embedded in the heavy wooden door.

Thick frost emerged from her palm, filling the keyhole.

The frost continued to accumulate and compress until it finally solidified into ice.

Franca skillfully extracted the ice block, revealing a transparent key.

That works? Jenna was surprised and eager to see what happened next.

Sensing her gaze, Franca said smugly, “I have a friend, you see—I really have a friend—one who’s quite skilled at picking locks. We had a conversation about using a Witch’s power for such purposes.”

Once she made the ice more solid, Franca inserted it into the keyhole again and twisted it gently.

With a click, the heavy wooden door swung open.

Franca retracted the ice key and allowed it to melt, erasing all traces.

Before venturing into Deep Valley Quarry, the Witch hung the brass key back on the gatekeeper’s waist and adjusted his posture to make him appear asleep.

With that done, Franca fetched a pouch of coins and took out a thick iron-colored ring adorned with tiny spikes.

“This is the Ring of Punishment I mentioned before. You’ll wear it today. I’ve already explained how to use it and its taboos. One thing to remember: you can’t use it more than three times within an hour. Also, take it off immediately after the operation and put it back in this coin bag.”

“Alright.” Jenna extended her left hand and allowed Franca to put the iron-colored ring on her middle finger, keeping their skin in contact.

Franca couldn’t contain her inexplicable joy as she adjusted her hood, confidently pushed open the creaky wooden door, and stepped into Deep Valley Quarry.

Once Jenna joined her inside, she made sure to close and lock the wooden door behind them.

This made it nearly impossible for anyone outside to detect their presence within the quarry.

As skilled Assassins with night vision, Franca and Jenna didn’t rely on carbide lamps, yet they could easily see everything within the tunnel.

The passageway was in a state of disrepair, covered in moss, and with cracks running along the stone walls, giving an ominous feeling that any moment, a piece might collapse.

A short distance ahead, they noticed an empty hole, no different from the other underground ones they had seen before.

For almost half an hour, Jenna and Franca diligently searched the small area, looking for any signs of suspicious activity, but their efforts yielded no results.

“Something’s definitely not right,” Franca whispered, her voice barely audible, as they returned to the spot near the tunnel entrance.

The complete absence of anything unusual happening made them even more suspicious about the gatekeeper not having the key to unlock the door.

Jenna pondered for a moment and then suggested, “Maybe he’s afraid that someone might storm in and cause the mine to collapse, so he decided to keep the key away. A gatekeeper’s job is only to intercept, not to open the door.”

Before Franca could say something, they heard a distinct click.

It was the sound of the Deep Valley Quarry’s door opening!

Franca and Jenna exchanged glances and quickly found cover not far from the exit of the tunnel.

The quarry door creaked open, and the soft bluish glow of a carbide lamp spilled out, pushing back the darkness in the tunnel.

Franca and Jenna peeked out and caught sight of a man in a gray robe.

The man had a white apron wrapped around his waist, a typical garment worn by ancient stonemasons. The hood of his robe rested at the back of his neck, not covering his head.

Such attire was commonly associated with ascetics or monks of the God of Steam and Machinery Church.

Holding a lit carbide lamp, the monk had dark, short hair. His left eye was a mesmerizing combination of iron-gray gears, screws, and springs, all supporting an emerald-green crystalline false eye.

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Chapter 288 - 288 Self-Recommendation

288 Self-Recommendation

In the city of Trier, prosthetic eyes were not a common sight, but there were still a fair number of people who wore them. But Jenna and Franca had never seen anyone take mechanizing a quarter of their faces for a prosthetic eye to this extent.

However, when they recalled that the monk was suspected to be from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, it made sense. Fanatical devotion to machinery was their hallmark!

Carrying a carbide lamp and wearing a white apron like a stonemason, the monk entered the tunnel step by step. His emerald-green prosthetic eye, surrounded by gears and springs, seemed to possess a life of its own as it rotated left and right, scanning the surroundings.

Franca tugged at Jenna, signaling for her not to look towards the tunnel. She was to quickly avert her gaze to avoid detection.

The two of them slunk deeper into the shadows, hiding beyond the reach of the carbide lamp's light.

The gray-robed, hooded monk from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery advanced slowly, surveying his surroundings as he approached the bottom of Deep Valley Quarry, the area that had collapsed and been buried.

Thanks to their Assassin abilities and the cover of darkness, Jenna and Franca remained undetected. They waited until the monk was far away before quietly peeking out from their hiding spot, eyes fixed on his back.

The monk stopped beside the collapsed area, extending his right palm which glinted with an iron-like metallic sheen, grasping a protrusion on the wall.

A grinding sound echoed as if multiple massive gears were slowly rotating and meshing.

The stone wall cracked open as metal chains extended out from behind each rock. The rocks bloomed like flowers, revealing a dark cave behind.

With the help of the monk's carbide lamp and their eagle-eyed Assassin vision, Franca and Jenna could see a thin white fog inside the cave and arms and legs embedded in the rock walls—human arms and legs!

Some were still fresh while others had shriveled, but there were no signs of decay.

Jenna and Franca exchanged shocked and fearful looks.

As the monk entered the cave and triggered a mechanism, the metal chains relaxed, allowing the rocks to return to their original positions, leaving only faint cracks as signs of the hidden entrance.

So that's how it is… I assumed the cracks were from a collapse, so I didn't inspect them… Franca realized why they hadn't noticed anything amiss before.

She tugged Jenna's arm and whispered, "Let's get out of here first and come back another time."

Having discovered the secret and knowing how to open it, there was no need to confront the monk from the God of Steam and Machinery Church directly. They could return later!

Jenna nodded slightly, twirled the Ring of Punishment on her finger, and crouched down. She followed Franca away from their hiding spot and back through the tunnel to the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry.

Seeing Jenna about to open the door, Franca quickly stopped her and whispered, "No hurry."

"Why?" Jenna asked, puzzled.

Franca straightened instinctively and smiled.

"Just because one monk went in doesn't mean he's alone. Perhaps there are two companions outside, guarding against intruders. If we stroll out casually, we might expose ourselves and get attacked! Besides, the gatekeeper could be awake already."

Jenna looked a little abashed. "You're right."

Franca consoled her immediately, "It's just experience. Now you know better for the future."

She took out a palm-sized mirror and handed it to Jenna. "Help me carry this. I'll scout ahead. If I get ambushed, take the chance to hide in the shadows by the door and sneak out with the mirror."

Realizing Franca intended to use Mirror Substitution, Jenna agreed without hesitation.

Franca carefully opened the heavy wooden door a crack and peeked out.

The only sounds were chirping insects and frogs. All was still otherwise.

The door opened wider and Franca slipped out into the darkness beyond the crimson moonlight's reach.

Jenna gripped the mirror tightly, tense and ready.

After more than ten seconds, Franca returned and whispered, "It's clear, let's go."

Jenna exhaled in relief and darted out, closing the door silently behind them.

As they left the quarry, they glanced at the rock-walled "hut" and saw the gatekeeper still asleep, but in a different posture.

From a distance, Franca noticed a red and swollen mark under his ear. "He was knocked out, not drugged…" she murmured with a frown.

Jenna recalled the cybernetic-eyed monk and pointed at the quarry door. "The one inside did it?"

Franca nodded gently. "Very likely. He doesn't want the gatekeeper to know he's here. Poor man, he probably fainted again before the sedative wore off."

Jenna smiled. "Or someone else knocked him out before we got here. Someone might have used some other method to knock him out."

"…" Franca paused, then sighed sympathetically. "If so, I feel bad for him."

Oblivious to each other, every group had dealt with the gatekeeper their own way. As a result, the poor man remained unconscious repeatedly.

Wasting no time, Jenna and Franca slipped away under the cover of the night.

…

Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian returned to the café upstairs, ordered a glass of red wine, and sipped it slowly.

After a while, Louis came up and whispered, "Boss, some bounty hunters are causing trouble at Salle de Gristmill, demanding a cut of the profits."

With the Poison Spur Mob's upper ranks destroyed, some remnants had been arrested, some had fled, some joined other mobs, and some found legitimate work. Their former businesses had been taken over at low prices by various factions.

The Savoie Mob got the largest share but now lacked manpower. Some industries operated fairly independently. Occasionally, opportunists tried to take advantage of the "power vacuum."

Lumian cracked his knuckles and grinned. “Send word asking if they want to be my enemies or my dogs.”

He realized that after becoming a Pyromaniac, he had grown more aggressive. Itching for a fight after so long, his hands twitched in anticipation.

Furthermore, for someone to dare challenge a dance hall nominally belonging to the Savoie Mob, there might be one or two Beyonders among the bounty hunters. Lumian’s Shadow Branch lacked a corresponding Beyonder characteristic.

“Yes, Boss!” Louis replied eagerly before hurrying downstairs to send the “invitation.”

Lumian had planned to return to Auberge du Coq Doré to write Madam Magician but now waited patiently.

In less than half an hour, Louis returned with a man.

He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, wearing a cheap suit and black top hat. With brown hair, brown eyes, refined features, and a burly build, he could have been a protagonist at the Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons

Seeing Lumian, the man smiled, doffed his hat, and greeted, “Good evening, Boss.”

“Who are you?” Lumian asked with an amiable smile.

The man replied solemnly, “Boss, didn’t you ask me to be your dog?”

“…” Momentarily stunned, even the quick-witted Lumian needed a few seconds to respond.

He had said it purely to provoke them and see if they would retaliate.

After recovering, Lumian chuckled. “I told you to be a dog, and you’ll really do it?”

“This is my big chance!” The man didn’t seem ashamed at all, rather honored. “I believe following you will let me achieve my true worth. In time, I could even become your godson!”

How old are you? You’re more fawning than “Giant” Simon… Interested, Lumian asked, “Why do you think I’ll give you a chance?”

The man didn’t answer immediately but glanced meaningfully at Louis and Sarkota, hinting for them to leave.

Unworried about assassination attempts, Lumian had them exit before smiling at the man. “Go on.”

The man cleared his throat. “My name is Lugano Toscano, a Beyonder.”

“Which pathway? What Sequence?” Lumian’s eyebrows rose.

Lugano forced a smile. “I’m a Planter, Sequence 9.”

Earth Mother Church’s pathway? Lumian nodded thoughtfully. “From Feynapotter?”

“No, Riston Province,” Lugano replied, smiling. “A few years ago, some friends and I became bounty hunters. I got to know a Feynapotter Beyonder and later acquired his belongings when he passed away.”

A fellow countryman… Did you kill him or just conveniently profit from his death? Lumian gestured for him to continue.

Lugano chuckled. “I can now advance to Sequence 8 Doctor but lack funds for the potion ingredients. I’ve heard of your exploits, Boss, and believe you to be a powerful Beyonder. I also know the Savoie Mob lacks manpower, so I caused some trouble to meet you. I hope to work for you, help manage your estates, and earn money through hard work. Doctors are useful for ordinary people and Beyonders alike.”

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Chapter 289 - 289 Late Night Visitors

289 Late Night Visitors

“Doctor?” Lumian recalled the two canisters of Healing Agent obtained from the Poison Spur Mob.

Their healing effects were quite impressive indeed.

Leaning back in his chair, Lumian gazed intently into Lugano Toscano’s eyes, pondering silently for some time.

Gradually Lugano grew uneasy, his body tensing up.

Finally Lumian smiled.

“Salle de Gristmill isn’t my property. I’m just managing it for the Boss.

“I’m not sure you can handle it, but I’ll give you a chance.”

Lugano visibly relaxed and smiled. “Boss, I won’t let you down!”

Lumian raised his voice to call Louis over.

“From now on, you’ll be Lugano’s deputy at the Gristmill. Manage it together.”

Is this for real? But why give an untested new recruit such an important post? Before Louis could react, Lumian had already turned to Lugano.

“You have two months. You and your friends will be the dance hall’s protectors for now. Take a portion of the profits; negotiate the details with the manager.”

He deliberately left the profit distribution vague, especially his own cut. He wanted to see what Lugano would do.

“Thank you, Boss!” Lugano’s joy was unconcealed.

He nearly blurted out, “Once I’m a Doctor, I’ll treat any illness or injury you have.” But that felt like cursing misfortune upon Lumian, so he quickly sealed his lips.

Watching them leave while discussing the dance hall, Lumian’s smile faded.

Lugano’s fawning and zeal made him suspect ulterior motives, like him with Baron Brignais and the fake diamond necklace.

But Lumian had cowed the Baron by showing his might and madness. The key was proving the value of exploiting him. Lugano was more focused on ingratiation. Of course, he had revealed his usefulness too.

That's why Lumian decided to give him Salle de Gristmill for two months—to monitor any abnormalities and act quickly if the bounty hunter had hidden motives. Or gain a Doctor cheaply if he was clean.

Either way, it wouldn't cost Lumian anything. Salle de Gristmill belonged to the Savoie Mob; he would just lose some of his own share. That could be offset by Lugano stabilizing the unruly dance hall.

After sitting awhile, Lumian left for Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré. Drawing the curtains, he sat at the table and began writing.

"Esteemed Madam Magician,

"I've officially joined the Iron Blood Cross Order.

"The initiation ritual was…

"I'm puzzled. The Order has members clearly not from the Hunter pathway. How did they pass the vigil? Assassins? Or did Gardner confirm their trustworthiness some other way, bypassing corruption?"

He almost asked about entering 13 Avenue du Marché at special times, but that was surely monitored by official Beyonders. It was unlikely anyone could approach then.

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian summoned the doll messenger on the altar.

Wary, he asked, "Am I still being watched?"

"No," the doll slowly shook her head.

Relieved, Lumian scheduled reporting to Mr. K and heading to The Fool's cathedral for a sermon.

After nearly fifteen minutes, Madam Magician replied:

"I once heard from Mr. Fool's Oracle that a friend of his was originally in the Iron and Blood Cross Order but couldn't stand it and fled to sea.

"I didn't understand at first, but now I see—it's been hard on you."

It wasn't so bad. Watching them perform was rather interesting, a study in human diversity… Lumian didn't see an issue with it.

Something else concerned him more.

When mentioning the Oracle, Madam Magician didn't say "one of."

Lumian suspected Mr. Fool had only a single Oracle!

Meaning the Major Arcana card holders of the Divine Council weren't considered Oracles.

Pondering this, Lumian read on:

"They might be Assassins or used another corruption method.

"Remind the Two of Cups—if accepting the vigil, bring the ancient underground mirror. Other than keeping in mind not to respond, it's best to bring the ancient mirror that provides entry into the underground mirror world. Hunter/Demoness corruption likely differs. It may help."

That mirror… Mulling it over, Lumian swiftly burned the letter in crimson flames.

Just as he was about to wash up, he sensed something and glanced at the door.

A series of knocks promptly came.

"Who is it?" he called.

A strained voice answered, "Guess who I am."

Seated, Lumian looked helplessly at the bedbug-free ceiling. "Come in."

As expected, it was Franca and Jenna, dressed as Assassins.

"Here to play Fighting Evil?" he joked.

Franca scoffed, "I don't play cards with sore losers like you."

Having tricked many into drinking excessively over card games recently, Lumian had been winning at Fighting Evil with the ladies and mocking their poor skills. Suspecting cheating, Franca had intensely coached her dancers the past few days.

Entering, Franca added, "We're here to borrow mysticism magazines."

Lumian sneered. "Nice try. Why come so late just for that? Is waiting till morning not an option? Jenna doesn't seem the studying type."

He smiled. "What's really going on?"

The two gritted their teeth in sync.

After Franca shut the door, Jenna glanced around and whispered, "Are the walls too thin here? Could neighbors overhear us?"

Lumian smiled approvingly. “You’re learning—thinking about eavesdroppers now. Not like before, blabbing recklessly without a care.”

Before… Franca’s suspicious gaze shifted from Jenna to Lumian, then from Lumian to Jenna.

“Dammit! “We didn’t discuss anything important!” Jenna defended. “Why not mention Charlie? He spills secrets immediately.”

Charlie? Franca’s frown faded.

“It was fine—others were asleep or gone. That’s why I didn’t stop him.” Lumian stood, ritual dagger in hand. Letting spirituality flow from the blade, he enveloped the room in a wall of spirituality.

The singing and rowdiness on the streets and the inn’s noises instantly grew distant and muted.

Jenna was amazed. Franca pursed her lips and said to Jenna, “A basic wall of spirituality ritual. Once you become a Witch, you’ll naturally master it.”

At this point, she couldn’t help but imagine what Witch Jenna would look like.

The two ladies sat side by side by Lumian’s bed and discussed the missing Deep Valley Cloister gatekeeper, focused on their quarry findings tonight.

“What’s down there? What should we do?” Franca returned Lumian’s sedative.

Lumian smiled at his companion who wasn’t wearing red boots. “Don’t you have an answer already?”

With Franca’s experience, she surely had a plan by now.

Franca smiled awkwardly. “Just wanted your thoughts.”

“My thoughts?” Lumian joked, “Sneak in while the monk’s away for that 20,000 verl d’or!”

Jenna looked around warily. “Meaning it’s too dangerous to investigate further?”

Having heard Lumian’s mockery countless times now, she could distinguish sarcasm, well-meaning teasing, and jokes.

“Right,” said Franca. “Recalling the client, there seems to be an internal Deep Valley Cloister conflict—someone hiding, someone exposing. Meddling in an orthodox Church’s internal conflict is dangerous for any Beyonder.”

“Internal conflict?” Jenna was startled.

Lumian chuckled. “A missing gatekeeper, and some random person offers 20,000 to find him, even just the corpse? And said corpse needs to be carried to the Deep Valley Cloister. Clearly wants someone to see it.”

Jenna was almost convinced, but she still had a lot of doubts. “B-but the limbs in the cave seem too sinister for an orthodox Church.”

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Chapter 290 - 290 Lavigny Docks

290 Lavigny Docks

“Er…” Franca deliberated briefly before telling Jenna, “When it comes to losing control and madness, orthodox or wild Beyonder—all are equal. Those monks can become monsters too, or have mental problems and walk the abyss.”

Jenna grew grave as she listened.

It wasn’t the first time Franca had said something similar, but without personal experience, the full cruelty and horror of those words never quite sunk in. Seeing the limbs in the dark cave had driven home the visceral reality of losing control and madness.

Lumian added meaningfully, “That’s why the acting method is so important.”

“But never forget you’re only acting. You should know very well being a theater actress—you mustn’t lose yourself in a role. Even without being a Beyonder, that path leads to mental issues.” Franca and Lumian educated the newcomer one after another.

Jenna nodded solemnly.

Franca returned to the missing gatekeeper. “My plan is this—reveal the cave anonymously to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church via my sources. How they handle it is their affair. Even if they suppress it, they’ll be vigilant against trouble now. I’ll also inform the client and see his reaction. We might get paid for our work.”

She chose the Eternal Blazing Sun Church over the God of Steam and Machinery Church Beyonders, unsure which side was trustworthy in this internal conflict.

“No objections here,” Jenna conceded after hearing their advice, shelving her longing for the 20,000 verl d’or reward.

Franca turned to Lumian. “I’ve found a buyer for Harvest Sacrifice, but the deal isn’t finalized yet. Offer is 10,000 verl d’or. I gave you 4,000 already, and can give you another 1,000 in two days.”

“Very efficient.” Lumian smiled approvingly.

“Can’t tell if that’s praise or mockery,” Franca muttered.

Jenna listened enviously. 10,000 verl d’or was casual business for them, while her family struggled to pay 7,000-8,000 for the treatment of her mother.

This is what it means to be a Beyonder… Her understanding grew clearer.

Glancing at the curtains, Lumian didn't get Jenna to leave. "Last night, I completed the test and officially joined the Boss's inner circle."

"What kind of test?" Still aggrieved, Franca had already vented her anger once, leaving mostly curiosity.

Lumian described Gardner's late visit to Salle de Bal Brise, how he was requested to stay the night at 13 Avenue du Marché, and him overcoming the abnormal corruption until sunrise.

He concealed Termiboros, portraying himself as intelligent, decisive, perceptive and steadfast—grasping the crux with just a few details and adhering to the principle of no response despite the influences.

Lumian excelled at fabrication.

Franca still felt lingering fear and suspicion. "You really didn't waver at all?"

Jenna agreed—she would have responded the moment the door opened. Franca might have lasted until her face bled.

Lumian chuckled. "I definitely felt some uncertainty, but I trusted my judgment more."

Franca sized him up doubtfully. "You really thought of not responding by yourself?"

"No." Lumian ended the fiction honestly.

"…" The ladies were stunned.

Lumian seized the chance to divert attention, smiling. "Don't be daft. A recently graduated mysticism novice like me could never think of that. I got intelligence beforehand of course. If you do the vigil, remember—do not respond, and take the mirror that provides entry into the underground mirror world. 13 Avenue du Marché's abnormalities may differ by pathway."

Enlightened, Franca grasped his source. She muttered, "No girlfriend for you with that attitude!"

She had almost been provoked just now, let alone a real woman. Relieved, Franca thought the rascal Ciel had no romantic prospects currently.

While still irked by the mockery, Jenna also regained confidence.

She had thought her intelligence irredeemably inferior to Ciel's.

Admirably, he had firmly trusted the intelligence and not wavered.

She pursed her lips and said, “I’m seeing more of the mysticism world’s horrors.”

The 13 Avenue du Marché abnormality was even more terrifying than the Deep Valley Quarry’s secret cave scene. By comparison, her underground ordeal with Hedsey seemed just a criminal case.

“There will be more such occurrences in the coming years.” Franca seized every chance to motivate Jenna’s advancement.

Lumian then mentioned his guess that Avenue du Marché 13 only affected Beyonders of the Hunter and Demoness pathways at specific times.

Discussing a while longer, the ladies left with a stack of mysticism magazines, returning to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

…

At 3 p.m. the next day, Lumian, who had been playing the part at Salle de Bal Brise all day, arrived at Lavigny Docks in the square district by taking multiple public carriages, ready to hear The Fool bishop’s sermon.

It was a lively inland river port, teeming with steam ships emitting white fog. Countless dockworkers used various tools and their strength to move crates of goods and stack them on flat surfaces along the tracks.

Massive machines towered over the docks, some standing more than ten to twenty meters tall, made entirely of steel components. Operated by massive steam engines and controlled by technicians, they effortlessly lifted steel crates that would be impossible for humans to move.

Lumian observed the chaotic and bustling scene, a mix of spectacular sights and grimy realities.

He strolled around the dock, acting like a carefree tourist rather than inquiring about The Fool cathedral’s location from suspicious foreigners.

Buildings surrounded the harbor, housing bars, motels, warehouses, beer houses, cafés, restaurants, and dance halls. Street vendors loudly peddled their goods along the paths.

Lumian also noticed frosted glass windows with green shutters, indicating licensed brothels.

After taking a long detour, Lumian finally arrived at Mr. Fool’s cathedral.

It looked like an ordinary four-story house with a bell tower and pointed roof, completely black. Engraved on the outer wall was the familiar mystical symbol: Mr. Fool’s symbol, a silvery-white symbol composed of an incomplete Pupil-less Eye and a portion of Contorted Lines.

Before entering, Lumian took his time, continuing to explore the area as if he were casually shopping.

As a Hunter, it was second nature for him to assess his surroundings when he had the chance.

After walking for a while, Lumian chose a bar called Sea Breeze to gather information about The Fool cathedral from merchants, sailors, and locals.

The interior of Sea Breeze was decorated like a cabin, with taxidermied fish, rudders, and sail fragments adorning the walls. The air was thick with the scent of liquor and cheap cosmetics.

Some sailors sat together, engrossed in a card game, while others were seen in the company of street girls. At the bar counter, a few were enjoying drinks and boasting.

Lumian scanned the area and noticed a man who immediately caught his attention.

This man sat in an armchair near the bar, exuding an air of arrogance as he casually rested his hands on the chair's back. He occasionally sipped his wheat beer, propping his legs up on the small round table.

It wasn't just the man's demeanor that intrigued Lumian, but the way the other sailors behaved around him.

They either kept their distance, giving the area a wide berth, or approached with deferential expressions. Even if they were teased by the man, they seemed honored to be in his presence.

A significant figure from the sea, perhaps? Lumian speculated silently as he subtly studied the man.

The man appeared to be in his thirties, dressed in a linen shirt, a brown vest, dark brown pants, and sturdy black leather boots. His eyebrows and hair were charred yellow, like they had been kissed by flames. His bright, dark blue eyes and facial features hinted at a southern Intis heritage.

Feeling Lumian's gaze on him, the man smiled and lifted his wheat beer in a toast.

Returning the smile, Lumian made his way to the bar counter, ordering a glass of Lanti Proof, a favorite among pirates and sailors.

Taking a sip of the flavorful and potent malt liquor, Lumian couldn't contain his curiosity. He nodded towards the nearby armchair and asked the bartender in a hushed tone,

"Who is that?"

The bartender’s expression turned serious as he responded in a deep voice, “You don’t know him?”

To him, not recognizing that individual was rather surprising.

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Chapter 291 - 291 Important Figure

291 Important Figure

Lumian set his glass down and flashed a smile, speaking in Intisian but with the accent of the Riston Province.

“I arrived in Trier just two days ago. Came to Lavigne in search of work.”

Thanks to Aurore’s help, he could speak like a local from Trier, shedding his Riston Province Dariège accent. Having spent six years in Cordu, he had a knack for learning, imitating, and adapting to new dialects effortlessly.

The tired bartender looked around as if he hadn’t slept well and spoke cautiously, “That’s the famous Blazing Danitz, a significant figure at sea!”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Lumian replied bluntly.

The bartender cleared his throat, reminding Lumian to watch his tone and attitude.

“Have you heard about the six Pirate Kings and nine Pirate Admirals?”

“A little,” Lumian honestly admitted.

His knowledge about the Pirate Kings and Pirate Admirals came from newspapers and adventure novels, and he was aware of Gehrman Sparrow hunting down a few. He knew that the great adventurer’s servant, Dubois, had once served as a pirate on Vice Admiral Iceberg’s ship. He knew of Ailment Maiden or Vice Admiral Ailment, and the frequent change of Pirate Admirals. As for the Pirate Kings, they were well-established and had held their positions for so long that no one could remember when they first came to power.

Realizing Lumian wasn’t completely ignorant, the bartender breathed a sigh of relief.

“That individual used to be a pirate, acknowledged to be stronger than all the Pirate Admirals, second only to the six Pirate Kings.”

Quite impressive… Lumian couldn’t determine the exact Sequences of the Pirate Admirals and Pirate Kings, but their survival despite constant pursuit by the authorities showed they weren’t weak.

Blazing Danitz ranked seventh among the pirates, almost reaching the level of a quasi-Pirate King. He was undeniably formidable!

A Saint? If he's one, the same can be said for the Pirate Kings… The strongest among Sequence 5s? Lumian quickly grasped the bartender's words.

"Used to be?"

"Yes, used to be. He's no longer a pirate or a Treasure Hunter. Look, there's no wanted poster of him on the wall." The bartender gestured around.

But there's my wanted poster… Thankfully, the bounty is low. It's tucked away in a corner where no one pays attention… Lumian asked curiously, "He can just stop being a pirate because he wants to? Did the authorities cooperate and revoke his wanted poster?"

Which country or orthodox Church did he surrender to?

The bartender lowered his voice even further.

"He's now a member of the Church of The Fool, the envoy of that deity."

Mr. Fool's Oracle? Perhaps that one and only Oracle? Lumian was taken aback.

The bartender assumed Lumian wasn't familiar with the Church of The Fool, so he explained, "That's a deity recognized by all orthodox Churches. Heh heh, why would a deity choose such a name?

"The Fool's faith is very popular at sea. Many sea merchants and sailors believe in Him. They even pooled money to build The Fool cathedral in Lavigny."

"The cathedral's bishop is that Oracle?" Lumian deliberately lowered his voice.

"No." The bartender shook his head. "But Blazing Danitz often comes to Trier. He likes it here. Yes, he's from Intis. There isn't an Intisian who doesn't long for Trier."

Just as Lumian was about to say something, the important figure at sea, the Oracle of The Fool's Church, Blazing Danitz, finished his remaining wheat beer and stood up, heading towards Sea Breeze's entrance.

Almost simultaneously, the sailors—playing cards, drinking, boasting, and making out with street girls—stood up in an unusually orderly fashion.

They didn't cause any commotion as they silently and orderly followed Blazing Danitz out of the bar.

If he hadn't witnessed this scene, Lumian wouldn't have realized that all the sailors in the bar were subordinates of The Fool's Oracle.

Blazing Danitz… From his nickname, he deals with fire… Could he also be from the Hunter pathway? Lumian sipped his Lanti Proof and chatted with the bartender about the Church of The Fool.

“What kind of deity is The Fool?”

The bartender gestured a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest and shook his head.

“I’m not a follower, so how would I know?”

“By steam!” Lumian drew a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest as well.

The bartender glanced at the empty area and said, “But the Church of The Fool isn’t bad. Even if you’re just a tramp, even if you don’t believe in The Fool, you can still receive communion after entering their cathedral.

“If you ask them for help, you might even get a meal with meat and bread and a room to sleep in.”

“Should I join the queue now?” Lumian asked with a smile.

The bartender shook his head again.

“No need. They can’t leave the cathedral to preach or proselytize. Only the local tramps know they can seek help there, but they only go once in a while because the Church of The Fool is more willing to offer job opportunities to them.”

After a pleasant chat and having figured out the schedule of The Fool’s cathedral’s bishop sermons, Lumian finished his Lanti Proof and decided to make the most of the spare time by exploring the nearby streets in detail.

He soon noticed that several strategic points were guarded by the military, armed with cannons and massive firearms that required water-cooling.

The government’s distrust of these sailors and merchants, who occasionally indulge in piracy around the docks, is evident… Lumian turned away and hurried towards The Fool’s cathedral before darkness fell.

The cathedral had a simple layout, devoid of gold embellishments or intricate machinery. The most remarkable aspect was its numerous windows, allowing natural light to illuminate the interior without the need for candles and gas lamps even before nightfall.

Like many religious spaces, the walls were adorned with giant murals, although the colors were muted and somber.

Using the fading light of dusk, Lumian examined the mural’s contents and discovered that it depicted a wilderness where humans struggled to navigate.

These humans were unusually tall, almost resembling legendary giants. Some had three eyes, while others lacked noses, leaving only two dark holes. They looked more like monsters than ordinary people.

Despite the pain and despair evident on their faces, their eyes shimmered with hope.

Leading these peculiar humans were several distinct and detailed guides. Some had gray hair and carried two swords on their backs. Others wielded dark-blue sledgehammers emitting a sun-like glow. There were also figures clad in dark black armor with silver-gray curly hair…

At the forefront of these guides stood a figure.

Dressed in a black trench coat and a half top hat, the figure walked with a straight back, holding a lantern.

Just ahead of the figure was a ball of light—the altar of The Fool's cathedral—a silver-white Sacred Emblem emitting a radiant glow under the sunlight.

Lumian's attention was drawn to a few stained glass panes. Sculpted in an exaggerated style, angels and saints adorned them. Some were also featured in the murals, while others were not. There were angels with wings and halos, and saints with only halos.

Lumian carefully circled the area, observing for over half an hour. Eventually, he found a seat and settled in to wait for the 6 p.m. sermon.

As time passed, many people entered the cathedral. Some were dressed as merchants, others as typical sailors. There were also dockworkers, visibly exhausted after a long day's work, and a few street girls as well.

Amidst the tolling of the bell, the bishop arrived at the altar.

His hair and eyes shone with a golden hue. Towering at 2.56 meters tall, he donned a finely tailored black trench coat and a half top hat, hardly resembling a typical clergyman.

With a hearty gesture, the boorish bishop pressed his hand to his chest and called out in a booming voice, "Praise The Fool!"

"Praise The Fool!" echoed the gathered believers, and Lumian enthusiastically joined in.

Flipping through the black-and-silver-patterned bible in his hand, the bishop spoke with a voice that reverberated through the cathedral,

"Our lord is known as The Fool. Across past, present, and future, he reigns supreme over the spirit world. He is also the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck. A beacon for all in the pursuit of eternity…

"He is compassionate, benevolent, and the savior of this world. He allows us to address him as him instead of Him…

“Our lord resides above both reality and the spirit world. His benevolence extends to Heaven and the land. Beside him stand eight angels…

“The Angel of Mercury is the embodiment of fate, our Lord’s most cherished angel. The Angel of Death has followed our Lord for the longest period of time and is the consul of the Underworld. The Angel of Redemption is our Lord’s bugle, once taking on the form of Gehrman Sparrow to deliver his revelations. The Angel of Life is the crystallization of wisdom itself, the indestructible spirituality that resides in everyone’s body.”

Gehrman Sparrow? That adventurer is an angel of Mr. Fool? Lumian was astonished by the revelation.

The giant bishop continued, “There’s also the Angel of Retribution beside the Lord’s throne. He is the Lord’s lightning, the Lord’s rage, and the Lord’s palm, the judge of all the fallen and the ones who aren’t chaste.

“Next to the Angel of Retribution is the Angel of the Holy Spirit, reigning over all spirits and representing our lord in controlling the spirit world.

“In contrast to Them, there are the Angel of Time and the Angel of Stars.

“The Angel of Time was an angel of ancient times. He eventually submitted to our Lord and now strikes the bell of Heaven.

“The Angel of Stars is a witness, a recorder, the eyes and ears of our lord…”

Lumian listened attentively, finding it hard to believe that there were eight angels by The Fool’s divine throne.

Wasn’t this strength too terrifying?

It seemed no different from an orthodox Church!

Suddenly, Termiboros’s magnificent voice resounded, “Do you believe it?”

“Why not?” Lumian replied in a hushed tone, as if reciting passages from the bible.

After all, whose bible, even among the orthodox Churches, didn’t have a touch of exaggeration?

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Chapter 292 - 292 Communion

292 Communion

Termiboros fell silent.

Lumian continued to listen intently to the bishop's sermon as he recounted the general situation of the Church of The Fool. He discovered that there existed another continent in this world called the Forsaken Land of the Gods—a place cursed and abandoned by the gods Themselves.

Despite the gods turning their backs on the continent, Mr. Fool refused to forsake it. He dispatched the Angel of Redemption—Gehrman Sparrow—to lead the surviving humans from the lost city-states out of the Forsaken Land of the Gods and guide them in rebuilding their homes on the maritime islands.

Consequently, the Church of The Fool's headquarters were established in the New City of Silver in the Sonia Sea.

The other two Holy Lands, New Moon City and Bayam, the capital of the Rorsted Archipelago, were also located in the same area.

Lumian listened with fascination, gaining a fundamental understanding of the Church of The Fool.

Following the sermon, the bishop and a few priests distributed communion.

It consisted of a glass of transparent, colorless liquid and a large fruit shell with charred marks covering it.

Lumian picked up the glass and took a sip. The liquid had a slight sweetness, reminiscent of dairy products but with a more fragrant essence.

Next, he used a wooden spoon to scoop out the food from the huge fruit shell.

As soon as he tasted the food, Lumian's expression turned surprised.

It's meat!

Isn't this a bit extravagant?

Even the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Communion couldn't compare to this. They only had red wine and unfermented flatbread.

Lumian perked up and chewed the food with interest. It was delicious, with a meaty texture and a mix of sweetness and slight sourness, like that of a fruit. Its aroma was entirely different from the usual dishes found in Trier.

While he ate, he listened to the bishop explain the origins of Communion.

It turned out that this was Angel of Redemption Gehrman Sparrow's favorite food during his travels across the land. As the bugle of the Lord, he preached the revelations of the Lord.

The liquid was called Teana, derived from a giant fruit unique to the Rorsted Archipelago, and it was extracted from the pulp.

Having lost most of its pulp, the Teana rind was stuffed with mashed mutton and fish, culminating in the communion, Teativa.

However, transporting such massive fruits from the Rorsted Archipelago to Trier for Communion was impractical. It required crossing three seas, and no matter how unripened the fruit was, it would inevitably rot, wasting valuable resources.

With the help of a particular botanist, the Church of The Fool had cultivated a modified Teana tree that could grow in southern Intis, producing a stronger milky scent.

A delicacy with a maritime charm… If it weren't for the Church of The Fool's inability to preach and proselytize, who knows how many people would convert solely due to the Communion… But that could lead to financial issues as well. Too many believers in The Fool would cause the expenses of Communion to skyrocket… After pondering the Church of The Fool's finances for a moment, Lumian, who hadn't eaten dinner yet, finished the Teativa clean and gulped down the Teana juice.

"Praise The Fool!" Lumian stood up sincerely and bowed. He slowly left the candlelit cathedral and stepped into the night.

Under the warm glow of gas street lamps, Lumian strolled along the port area, dressed in a linen shirt, black vest, and rolled-up sleeves. His destination was the other side of the docks, where he intended to catch a public carriage to Avenue du Boulevard.

Lavigny had grown quiet, with only occasional groups of sailors passing by, singing or shouting.

All of a sudden, a commotion erupted nearby, followed by a piercing scream.

As the sound echoed through the night, Lumian noticed a figure hurtling towards him at an incredible speed.

Casually, he sidestepped, acting like an innocent bystander.

Yet, if the approaching person happened to be vile or had indeed committed some wrongdoing and was now being chased, Lumian wouldn't mind sticking out his right foot and tripping them, just for the spectacle.

Within seconds, the figure reached the edge of the street lamp's glow, making Lumian's eyebrows twitch in surprise.

So fast!

Clearly not an ordinary human!

With the help of the gas lamps, Lumian got a good look at the figure's appearance.

It wasn't human—it was a monster!

Though its wrinkled head resembled a human's, its dark-green scales covered its body. Wearing a torn linen shirt and brown pants, its feet lacked shoes, and thin, tough skin membrane grew between its fingers. Slippery dark green mucus oozed over its form, and its palms and mouth were stained with blood.

Having encountered numerous monsters in Cordu's ruins, Lumian remained unperturbed. He only frowned slightly.

It reminds me of those murlocs mentioned in mysticism magazines. Those dark-green scales must provide formidable defense…

As Lumian pondered, the monster noticed him sidestepping and grew more violent and crazed in its expression.

Without warning, it lunged at Lumian.

Reacting swiftly, Lumian arched his body, not backing away, but stepping forward to face the suspected murloc.

Bang!

His right hand, emitting sparks, struck the creature's abdomen.

Then, he swiftly lowered his body, slipping under the armpit of the dark-green-scaled monster, avoiding its counterattack and effectively positioning himself behind the assailant.

Lumian spun around, his arms swinging. His fists, with flickering flames, delivered powerful blows to the back of the suspected murloc, knocking it to the ground.

Blows resounded until Lumian withdrew his hands, ceasing his assault. He observed silently as the struggling body left corrosive marks on the ground.

With a muffled explosion, crimson sparks erupted from the monster's eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. Its body swelled before collapsing, shedding several dark-green scales.

After a few convulsions, it lay still.

Lumian averted his gaze and looked towards the figures chasing after him. He nonchalantly flicked his hands, alleviating the corrosive pain caused by the dark-green liquid.

His injuries were minor. After all, he had delivered a barrage of powerful punches, and his contact with the dark-green scales and viscous liquid had been brief.

Soon, the figures reached the lamp pole.

They were sailors, led by a mixed-blood man from the Southern Continent, sporting braided hair and brownish-red skin.

He appeared to be in his thirties, with thick lips. His eyes first scanned the murloc-like monster lying motionless on the ground, then he looked at Lumian with surprise, suspicion, and fear.

After a few seconds of silence, the sailor with the braided hair spoke with a solemn voice, "This is the murloc we captured at sea. It injured one of our crewmates and managed to escape."

It is indeed a murloc… Did they truly capture it? Why didn't they turn it into various materials and transport it to Trier? Why risk keeping it alive? Lumian silently mused as he asked with a smile, "Are you planning to apologize on its behalf and compensate me for my mental distress to soothe my terrified mind?"

The sailor and his companions exchanged glances, unable to decipher the lad's true intentions.

In the distance, the sound of regimental-like running resonated, accompanied by gunfire.

Patrol soldiers had rushed over upon hearing the scream.

The sailor's heart tightened as he unconsciously grabbed the monster's corpse, closely observing Lumian's reaction. He intended to stop once the other party showed any dissatisfaction.

Simultaneously, he continued, "No problem. We have no problem."

What he meant was that they would provide compensation for Lumian's mental distress.

Lumian sensed that they mainly wanted the Beyonder characteristic produced by the murloc, but the monster was too weak. He wasn't in the mood to discuss how

the prize would be divided with them.

It was not worthy of the Shadow Branch at all!

If these individuals, who acted recklessly without concern for covering their tracks, managed to evade pursuit and crossed paths with him again, he could simply demand compensation from them for his mental distress.

As Lumian watched the sailors carry the murloc away, he continued on his way as if nothing had happened.

Before long, several patrolling soldiers caught up with him, examining his condition and inquiring if he had witnessed anything unusual.

Lumian candidly pointed in the direction the sailors had fled.

“I heard a scream and saw a group of people running that way. They were dressed like sailors.”

The officer leading the patrol nodded approvingly.

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

“No need to thank me. It’s what any responsible citizen should do,” Lumian replied with a smile.

Soon, the other soldiers discovered traces of corrosion and scales on the ground, along with sticky liquid that hadn’t entirely evaporated. They followed the trail towards the docks.

Lumian clicked his tongue and continued on his way towards the public carriage stop.

Clap! Clap! Clap! He heard a soft applause.

Feeling uneasy, Lumian turned his head and saw someone sitting on a nearby cargo box, seemingly having appeared out of nowhere.

The man’s eyebrows were charred yellow, and his hair shared the same color. His eyes were dark blue yet radiant. He wore a linen shirt, a brown vest, and a pair of black leather boots hung from his dark brown pants.

Lumian recognized the man and felt alarmed.

Blazing Danitz, a great pirate second only to a few Pirate Kings!

But Lumian calmed down when he recalled the man’s other identity: He was no longer a pirate; he was now Mr. Fool’s Oracle!

As the holder of a Minor Arcana card, Lumian believed that as long as he revealed his identity, Blazing Danitz wouldn’t give him trouble.

Blazing Danitz gazed at Lumian for a few seconds before effortlessly leaping down from the top of the wooden crates.

He chuckled and spoke leisurely, “To be able to swiftly choose the most effective, targeted, and efficient attack method against your prey, perfectly evading the enemy’s enhanced scale defense—your combat intelligence is quite impressive. I admire it.

“So, how about it? Are you interested in joining my team and becoming my subordinate?”

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Chapter 293 - 293 “Pious”

293 “Pious”

Inviting me to join your team without even checking my background or confirming my strength? Are you that confident, Mr. Fool’s Oracle? Lumian couldn’t help but criticize, feeling unsure about the whole situation.

He looked at Blazing Danitz and responded with a smile, “No.”

Blazing Danitz acknowledged tersely, his voice gaining intensity as if confirming it for the last time.

Lumian slipped his right hand into his pocket, maintaining his smile.

“Not interested.”

What a joke. How can I complete the Tarot Club’s mission if I join your team?

This requires your consultation with Madam Magician!

Danitz’s dark-blue yet bright eyes narrowed slightly, his aura instantly becoming more intense.

Lumian felt as if he were facing a spear or a loaded gun pressed to his forehead. Fear and danger washed over him.

However, he didn’t look away and met Blazing Danitz’s gaze with a calm determination, as if facing an apex predator.

After a brief silence that filled the air with tension, Blazing Danitz broke into a smile.

“Not bad. You’re quite resolute and bold. I admire you even more.”

With those words, the former great pirate, now The Fool’s Oracle, turned around and strolled towards the well-lit street in the distance.

Confidence naturally breeds resoluteness… Lumian thought silently as he withdrew his right hand from his pocket, revealing a tarot card held between his thumb and index finger.

The tarot card—Seven of Wands!

Though he couldn't fathom Blazing Danitz's impromptu recruitment, he felt somewhat glad to have encountered Mr. Fool's Oracle.

This meant that The Fool Church held substantial strength in Trier.

…

After leaving Lavigny Docks, Lumian hopped onto a public carriage and soon arrived at Avenue du Boulevard. He walked to 19 Rue Scheer and met Mr. K beneath the headquarters of the Psychic organization.

The Aurora Order Oracle remained seated in the red armchair, his face concealed in the deep shadows of his black hood.

His voice rasped as he inquired, "How's your progress in gaining Gardner Martin's trust?"

Lumian replied calmly, "I've already joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order."

Mr. K fell silent for a moment before asking, "How did you gain Gardner Martin's trust? How did he test you? And how did you pass the test?"

The Aurora Order Oracle altered his usual demeanor, posing three questions at once.

Lumian chuckled.

"Well, there was no need to gain Gardner Martin's trust. Simply joining the Iron and Blood Cross Order earned loyalty."

Upon hearing this, Mr. K, who had been reclining in his chair, sat up straight. The shadows in the basement seemed to stir, almost alive.

With his expertise and knowledge, discerning the hidden meaning behind Lumian's words wasn't difficult for him.

And it undoubtedly spelled danger: Lumian had indeed become a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, pledging his allegiance to them. He was here to report while bringing the powerful figures of the Iron and Blood Cross Order!

Lumian smiled, unfazed by the immense pressure radiating from Mr. K. He proceeded to recount how he informed Gardner Martin that he had become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, leading up to the vigil at 13 Avenue du Marché and the formal initiation ceremony.

He didn't hold back the fact that he had engaged in an underground transaction and fled in terror after encountering Supervisor Olson's monstrous creation.

As Lumian finished, Mr. K stood up, excitement in his tone as he verified Lumian's various details at 13 Avenue du Marché repeatedly.

Upon realizing that Lumian had used the honorific name at a crucial moment and received a divine revelation of “don’t respond,” Mr. K burst into a fit of maniacal laughter.

“Hahaha, hahaha, just as I thought, piousness is the only way out!”

The hooded Oracle’s laughter grew wilder, echoing through the basement, making Lumian’s eardrums tremble and a faint scent of salt and blood fill the air.

“Hahaha! Hahaha!”

Mr. K laughed so hard he nearly doubled over.

He no longer concealed his condition. The whole basement seemed enveloped in darkness, and he stood as the source of danger behind it all.

After a while, Mr. K paid no mind to Lumian’s presence, instead kneeling down, lowering his body to pray almost silently, as if thanking the Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God.

Lumian managed to keep his lips from twitching. Before leaving for Lavigny Docks, he had performed a ritual, praying to The Fool for the angel’s protection. He praised the True Creator of the Aurora Order and drew a cross on his chest, following an up-to-down, left-to-right order.

With a sudden display of piousness, Mr. K stood up and said with fervor, “This was all arranged by the Lord. He brought you here to join us.”

It depends on which lord you’re talking about… Lumian muttered, finding amusement in the situation, and replied humbly, “What He says will come true.”

This was one of the religious texts of the Aurora Order taught by Mr. K. Lumian had always regarded it as a sermon praising the deity’s strength. He found it quite useful in the present conversation.

The hooded Mr. K nodded, thoroughly satisfied.

“I had arranged for others to approach the exposed members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order before, but they lost contact with me and stopped reporting. They even put me in considerable danger.

“Now I understand why they failed. Their lack of piousness! In the face of danger and corruption, they didn’t even think to recite our Lord’s honorific name and seek His protection!

“But you, at the critical moment, had only my Lord in your mind. That’s the kind of piousness I admire the most.

“That’s why you successfully joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order without being corrupted!”

With only faith in a deity left in your mind… Will this affect your intelligence? Lumian observed Mr. K, gaining a deeper understanding of his state of mind and way of thinking.

Mr. K paced back and forth in front of Lumian, his excitement palpable in his voice.

“Based on the information you brought back, I now have a better understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s problems. I have a new insight into their current situation and their intentions.

“I can say you’ve completed half of the mission I assigned you. Next, you need to investigate the source of the abnormality, the exact timeline, and their roadmap for inciting the riot.

“If they find a way to enter Fourth Epoch Trier or a passageway, you must inform me immediately. Don’t let them succeed.”

Mr. K pondered for a few seconds and said, “The first option is to take out my finger and ignite it. As long as the environment isn’t special, I can sense it and roughly understand the cause.

“If that doesn’t work, pray to my Lord immediately, just like this time.”

“Alright,” Lumian agreed.

When the time came, he might have to try contacting Madam Magician. It seemed like he would be very busy.

After assigning the subsequent mission, Mr. K looked at Lumian in a friendly tone and asked,

“Since you’ve completed half of the mission and brought back crucial information, I can’t be stingy with the rewards. Tell me, what do you want?”

“I want a mystical item of bizarre nature. If you don’t have it, a corresponding Beyonder characteristic will do. I’ll find an Artisan to craft it myself,” Lumian answered without hesitation.

Mr. K let out a chuckle.

“You deserve that. Come back in three days. I’ll give you a few choices, or I’ll offer what I think suits you best.”

“Thank you, Mr. K,” Lumian expressed his sincere gratitude.

This was much more generous than what the Iron and Blood Cross Order offered!

“It’s not me you should be thanking, but the Lord,” Mr. K replied with a smile.

Helpless, Lumian drew the cross again.

“Praise be to you, the creator of all things. Praise be to you, who carries the burdens of the world’s sins.”

Mr. K chimed in, praising the True Creator.

“Unfortunately, our Aurora Order doesn’t have things like godfathers or godchildren. Otherwise, I’d be more than willing to baptize you again.”

Why do so many people express their admiration by wanting to be someone else’s father? Lumian found it amusing.

…

In high spirits after Mr. K’s assurance, Lumian made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré. He headed straight to the basement bar and ordered a glass of the unique textured distilled lemon liquor. As he chatted with the others, he found amusement in Charlie’s return, spreading all sorts of rumors.

Meanwhile, intermittent singing and clapping rhythms filled the air, creating a lively atmosphere that lasted until the early hours of the morning. When the customers, who had to work at dawn, finally departed to their residences, the bar quieted down.

Lumian realized he had been spending too many nights at Auberge du Coq Doré lately, neglecting his sleep at Salle de Bal Brise. He decided it was time to balance things out and head there next.

As he left Auberge du Coq Doré and walked along Rue Anarchie, where there were no gas street lamps, he noticed a figure emerging from the dark shadows ahead.

The person was almost as tall as Lumian, with broad shoulders and a muscular build, dressed in a linen shirt, a brown jacket, and a brownish-yellow wide-brimmed hat.

Gray hair adorned their head, and dark eyes stared intently. The man’s hairy skin added to his rugged appearance, giving off a wild sense of beauty.

Having halted Lumian, the man, whose age was difficult to gauge from his appearance, lifted his chin slightly and inquired, “Are you Ciel Dubois?”

Do you truly think yourself worthy of addressing me by my name? Lumian contemplated responding in a similar manner, uncertain of the man’s intentions, and sensing a hint of arrogance. Thus, he chose to pretend.

He asked cautiously, “And who might you be?”

The man remained composed, showing no signs of being affected. With a cold expression, he pressed on, “Tell me who the boss of your Savoie Mob is.”

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Chapter 294 - 294 Beyonder

294 Beyonder

You don't even know who's running the show for our Savoie Mob? And you're coming to me with this question? You must be clueless about the real deal. Our Boss is the Commanding Officer of the secret organization called the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and we're just a small part of the whole setup, Lumian thought, sliding his right hand into his pocket.

He quickly considered three possibilities.

First, Gardner Martin used the Savoie Mob for his secret missions, like smuggling some bizarre stuff through "Rat" Christo. Having been detected by someone or some faction, they now wanted to dig into the mob and expose the mastermind behind it.

Second, some members of the Savoie Mob must have offended the wrong people, and now the consequences were knocking at their door.

Third, after the Poison Spur Mob got wiped out, the Savoie Mob expanded rapidly, attracting attention from certain factions.

Lumian quickly dismissed the first two options. Whether it was some secret getting leaked or someone causing offense, he wasn't going to be the one facing questions about the identity of the Savoie Mob's Boss!

Usually, whoever did something secretive would get a visit from the investigators. Similarly, if someone offended another, they'd be targeted, or the leader shielding them. Lumian had never truly been involved in the Savoie Mob's clandestine affairs, nor had he recently defended any subordinates.

The person standing across from him was directly probing about the identity of the Savoie Mob's Boss. It wasn't about which individual belonged to the mob or some specific incident in the past.

Based on this, Lumian strongly suspected that some faction or individual had taken an interest in the Savoie Mob and planned to incorporate them.

Of course, he couldn't dismiss the possibility that a rival mob had teamed up with a powerful being to seek help in taking down the Savoie Mob's Boss.

Yet, in either case, they seemed to have a shallow understanding of the Savoie Mob. They didn't even know the superficial identity of Gardner Martin. All they knew was the most famous member of the mob in recent times. They had just

asked about him and paid him a “visit.”

In other words, they are treating the Savoie Mob as a regional mob with only a few Beyonders. Sending real powerhouses to deal with such a mob is clearly impractical, and they probably can’t afford to hire them either. Even a Mid-Sequence Beyonder is highly esteemed; it doesn’t go beyond Sequence 6. Lumian made this rough judgment in just a couple of seconds.

Seeing Lumian remaining silent and not reaching for his weapon, the tall man with bushy hair, dark eyes, and a brownish-yellow wide-brimmed hat let out a cold snort. His expression and eyes revealed a clear sense of danger.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt the darkness around him grow heavier, swallowing up the faint glow of distant street lamps and the crimson moonlight from the sky.

The darkness condensed like frost, slowly but firmly seeping into Lumian’s skin, flesh, and bones, causing an uncontrollable fear to well up within him.

Is that all? Lumian, who had been through major situations before, scoffed inwardly.

Gazing at the muscular man with gray hair, donning a linen shirt and a brown jacket, Lumian feigned a twinge of fear and blurted out, “It’s Gardner Martin! Gardner Martin, a member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce!”

The man nodded, pleased, and pressed on, “Where does he usually reside?”

“Lion” Ciel, the ruthless, crazed, and powerful mob leader, is no different from other mobsters!

They only know how to bully the weak and rely on their mob’s backing to take on rival mobs. When facing genuinely formidable foes and simple dark-type spells, their timidity and cowardice become evident!

Lumian swallowed hard and managed to say, “He lives at 11 Rue des Fontaines.”

At that moment, Lumian shook himself out of his daze.

“Let me tell you, our boss is a member of a secret organization. His strength is even more terrifying than you can imagine!”

A member of a secret organization? The broad-shouldered man was momentarily taken aback before breaking into a smile.

This was truly an unexpected windfall!

“Lion” Ciel is even more timid than I thought. He even spilled such vital information!

The man lifted his chin and sneered with a deep voice, “Well, did I mention that I, too, am part of a secret organization? A very ancient one.”

With those words, the surrounding darkness seemed to tighten its grip.

Really? I can’t quite tell… Lumian pondered the idea of luring this man and the faction behind him to confront the Boss. He wanted to see what would happen when the two secret organizations clashed, hoping to expose more of the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s secrets.

After a brief silence, Lumian couldn’t bear the weight of the darkness any longer. His right hand and arm, tucked into his pocket, trembled slightly.

“I don’t know, I don’t know. The Boss didn’t tell us the exact name!”

The man scrutinized Lumian for a few seconds and concluded that he shouldn’t know the details of the secret organization.

For a regional mob like theirs, the Boss is at most a member of some secret society.

The man couldn’t help but smirk sinisterly.

“Then take me to 11 Rue des Fontaines.”

As soon as he spoke, he lunged at Lumian, moving with such speed that he left afterimages.

Almost simultaneously, his nails shot out, long and sharp, flickering with a metallic light that exuded a dark sheen.

Yet, Lumian showed no fear, offered no resistance, and didn’t panic. He also moved to evade the attack, all while extending his right hand from the depths of his pocket.

In his hand, he held a blazing white fireball the size of a fist, sending it hurtling toward his assailant like a gift.

Fireball… Blazing white… The man with short gray hair on his face and the back of his hands found himself too close to turn around due to his speed. As these thoughts raced through his mind, he collided with the condensed, blazing-white fireball.

Boom!

Amidst the muffled explosion, the man’s abdomen burst into a bloody mess, emitting a distinct charred smell.

After the other party inquired about the Savoie Mob’s boss, Lumian discreetly tucked his right hand into his pocket. However, it wasn’t to draw a weapon or

guard against attacks. Instead, he used his clothes as cover to steadily conjure crimson flames in his palm. Layer by layer, he compressed them to their utmost, turning the flames into a blazing white. The explosive power was on par with a Giant Fireball, but even more concentrated, capable of burning through skin.

If the enemy's speed hadn't exceeded Lumian's expectations, he would have had a high chance of witnessing the enemy's neck exploding upon impact.

Amidst the rumbling, the man was sent flying, and Lumian was affected by the aftershocks, stumbling backward and tumbling a few times.

Both of them got up simultaneously. Lumian's shirt and vest bore burn marks, and many parts of his skin were damaged.

He saw an irregular, gaping wound on the man's abdomen, with blood-stained intestines flowing out and being stuffed back into place. The surface was marked with fractures and charred spots.

Despite the severe injury, the man didn't lose mobility. As he pressed his abdomen to prevent his intestines and other internal organs from spilling out, he let out a low growl of pain, anger, and violence.

Accompanied by the growl, short gray fur sprouted from his body, transforming him into a towering wolf.

His severed intestines began to writhe, attempting to reconnect. His charred skin slowly healed, and he forcefully closed the huge crack in his abdomen with his palm. Flesh and blood intertwined, bit by bit.

What potent vitality… Lumian sighed from the bottom of his heart at the sight.

He realized that given enough time, the other party would likely recover!

The other party's behavior and state reminded Lumian of a few passages recorded in Aurore's grimoires:

"Werewolf, a Sequence 7 of the Prisoner pathway, a category under Mutants. During the full moon or when they nearly lose control of their emotions, they will be controlled by their bloodthirsty and murderous desires, involuntarily transforming into a true werewolf.

"They possess terrifying strength, agility, and speed, and their self-recovery abilities are outstanding. Their claws and teeth are sturdy and sharp, and they are venomous. They are equivalent to Beyonder weapons of the same Sequence, capable of destroying thinner steel plates.

"They also know a few dark-type spells, capable of turning ordinary humans into puppet monsters with short lives.

"Werewolves often appear in the Southern Continent. They are often associated with various terrorist activities in the Northern Continent…"

I actually encountered a Werewolf Beyonder… Lumian didn't give the other party time to recover from his injuries. Crimson Fire Ravens materialized behind him, spiraling towards their target.

The Werewolf didn't sit idle either. Clutching his stomach to suppress the wound, he approached Lumian with extraordinary speed.

Most of the Fire Ravens' initial lock-on missed, but a few made minor changes in direction and landed on the target one after another, causing continuous rumbling.

The Werewolf suffered several more wounds, leaving him charred and blood-red.

Relying on his potent recovery abilities, he swiftly closed the distance between him and Lumian, disregarding his injuries. He intended to engage in close combat with the Pyromaniac, who excelled in spells, and tear him to pieces with his sharp and venomous claws.

At some point, the darkness around Lumian further encroached on him, causing him to feel an eerie chill on this summer night and slightly affecting him.

In an instant, crimson flames erupted from his body, enveloping him in scorching warmth.

The very next second, Lumian turned around and fled, dodging the Werewolf's claws.

This made the Werewolf, whose mind was filled with bloodthirsty and murderous desires, feel his adversary's fear. He believed that his target had already gone all out and lacked experience in such battles.

He chased after him and caught up to Lumian in a few swift strides.

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Chapter 295 - 295 Brains Are Important

295 Brains Are Important

Sensing the swipe that carried the scent of blood and char behind him, Lumian swiftly pivoted and darted into the alley leading to Rue du Rossignol.

The Werewolf's pitch-black eyes were bloodshot, and his severe injuries fueled his anger and desire to kill, overpowering most of his thoughts. He forcefully turned around and sprinted into the alley after Lumian.

Seeing Lumian vault over a barricade up ahead, he followed suit and leaped up as well.

In the next instant, he caught sight of an uncovered entrance to the sewers. Iron-black stairs led straight into the depths.

Lumian deftly stepped on the edge of the sewer entrance and jumped over the "natural" trap.

Bam! The Werewolf crashed into the sewers, finding himself halfway in. His wounds worsened, and his head spun.

Lumian seized the moment to turn around and conjure crimson Fire Ravens, sending them spiraling towards the Werewolf, who was stuck at the sewers entrance.

Amidst a muffled rumble, the crimson flaming ravens engulfed the area, setting the Werewolf's gray fur on fire, scorching patches of his skin, and tearing more flesh.

The Werewolf exerted strength with both hands and finally managed to leap out of the sewers. Lumian took the opportunity to flee, having successfully dealt a blow.

The Werewolf grew even angrier. All he wanted was to tear Lumian apart and spill his innards to the street dogs.

With a swoosh, Lumian, who had rushed to the alley exit, turned at high speed and sprinted to the left.

The Werewolf caught up in a few strides and followed the target's escape route.

However, a nearly one-meter tall barricade emerged in the darkness ahead of him. Lumian, already prepared, reached out and pressed down, using the situation to somersault and jump over.

The Werewolf realized it too late and didn't have time for other strategies. He could only choose between hastily jumping up or crashing straight into the barricade.

Exerting strength in his legs, he attempted to leap to the top of the barricade, but his forward momentum couldn't be stopped. Before he could fully ascend, his feet caught onto the obstacle.

Thud!

The Werewolf tumbled off the barricade; his fall made him see stars.

Lumian halted once more. With one hand in his pocket, he gazed at the enemy.

Around him, a new wave of Fire Ravens condensed and flew towards the base of the barricade.

The Werewolf tried his best to roll, but he was still struck by at least ten flaming ravens. The wound on his abdomen, which no longer had pressure on it, reopened, and blood-colored intestines flowed out.

Only then did the Werewolf realize that he had fallen into the other party's trap. He regained some of his rationality and assessed his weak body and unstable condition.

He extinguished the flames over his body and struggled to his feet, attempting to escape.

At that moment, Lumian's mocking voice echoed in his ears.

"Didn't your mommy tell you not to fight in an environment familiar to Hunters? You actually dared to pursue me on Rue Anarchie and the surrounding areas. I can only say that brains are important, but you don't have any."

The Werewolf's mind buzzed, and he became abnormally infuriated.

He willingly sacrificed his rationality and erupted with desire, bolstering his body in all aspects.

He had become a Lunatic!

He pursued Lumian once more.

Occasionally, Lumian would abruptly halt and counterattack. Other times, he would sneak under a stone statue's arm from a corner. When the Werewolf slammed into an obstacle, Lumian would turn around and unleash a volley of

crimson Fire Ravens. Sometimes, he would feign entering Underground Trier but lie in ambush, waiting for the incoming attack.

As the pursuit continued, the Werewolf finally reached his limit, his body teetering on the brink of collapse.

Regaining his senses from his frenzied state, he felt a strong premonition of danger. All he wanted was to leave this area and escape Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

At that moment, Lumian halted, as if he had sensed something. He turned around and smiled.

He watched as the Werewolf fled much slower than before while condensing a blazing white spear in his hand.

Lumian swung his body and hurled the flaming spear.

A blazing white stream of light streaked through the air, piercing the Werewolf's ravaged body, pinning him to the ground, and setting him ablaze.

Amidst the sudden blaze, Lumian walked toward the enemy with one hand in his pocket.

Crimson Fire Ravens materialized behind him, whistling and spiraling as they approached the Werewolf. They burrowed into his wounds, destroying his heart, lungs, and other organs.

By the time Lumian reached his target, the Mutant was no longer breathing—he was dead.

His eyes were wide open, filled with regret and fear.

Why'd you have to attack me? If you needed something, you could've just gone to the Boss of our Savoie Mob, couldn't you? Lumian shook his head while looking down at the Werewolf. Did you plan on turning me into a puppet for the assassination of Gardner Martin? Did you really think so low of mobsters? Your confidence made you arrogant.

Earlier, Lumian prepared for a tough battle. He had even prepared for a Sequence 6. His escape route was always near Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Once there, he could get Franca's attention and have her secretly use the enemy's blood to cast a fatal curse.

Lumian considered using the explosion caused by a fireball on Avenue du Marché to create a commotion and scare the enemy away if capturing the target proved difficult even with teamwork.

But the enemy's madness and desire to kill made Lumian doubt if he could think rationally and end the battle quickly to escape the pursuit of official Beyonders.

He himself had to hold on until dawn arrived.

Squatting down, Lumian searched the Werewolf's clothes, finding only 3 verl d'or coins, burnt banknotes, and a wallet without anything useful.

Have you never considered bribing me? Do you only want to rely on your strength to intimidate me? Lumian cursed, his heart aching.

He wasn't too disappointed as he knew the chances of this Werewolf being a bestowed were slim. Soon, it could secrete a Sequence 7 Beyonder characteristic that included Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 Beyonder characteristics, worth 30,000 to 40,000 verl d'or, or even more. He could use it to complement the Shadow Branch, create mystical items, or exchange it for more suitable Beyonder characteristics.

Considering the relatively weak explosions he caused, Lumian didn't linger on the street. After briefly dealing with the Werewolf's corpse, he picked him up and brought him to the back door of Salle de Bal Brise.

Sarkota and the other members of the Savoie Mob were no strangers to destroying corpses, quickly placing the body inside a bag and sending people to clean up the blood along the way.

Lumian tossed the body bag into the carriage belonging to Salle de Bal Brise, fully intending to find Gardner Martin that very night.

During the journey, he opened the body bag several times and finally noticed a blackish-green light secreting from the corpse, which merged with a sharp canine fang.

After a few seconds, Lumian had obtained this strange black-green fang.

After a moment's consideration, he decided to keep the fang in the body bag and see what Gardner Martin would do.

Based on the Commanding Officer's behavior, Lumian knew he would undoubtedly reward him when the time came. He might hand over the Werewolf Beyonder characteristic, switch it to another one, or purchase it at market value.

In any case, Lumian was ready to be honest about it.

Around 1 a.m., Salle de Bal Brise's carriage stopped at 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. Lumian unceremoniously pulled the rope beside the iron fence door, causing the chimes to reverberate through the grayish-white three-story villa.

Before long, a valet of Southern Continent descent arrived and opened the door, though he looked displeased at being woken up. When he saw Lumian's charred and tattered clothes and the body bag he dragged behind him, his attitude changed to that of a courteous servant.

Lumian brought the body bag into the villa and saw Faustino, the butler, who was also a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

After tying his bow tie, Faustino stared at Lumian and the body bag for a few seconds before asking in surprise, “What’s this?”

“A strange fellow,” Lumian replied with a smile.

Faustino didn’t inquire further and led Lumian into the activity room on the first floor.

There, Gardner Martin, donning a dark-blue silk robe, sat in a recliner and asked with a smile, “Who’s in the body bag? For you to rush here overnight, it doesn’t seem simple.”

Lumian untied the body bag and dumped the Werewolf’s corpse and the strange black-green fang onto the carpet in the activity room.

Gardner Martin’s expression turned serious at a single glance.

“A Werewolf…”

Lumian chuckled. “He came to me to inquire about the identity of the Boss of our Savoie Mob. He even wanted to control me and turn me into a puppet.”

Gardner Martin nodded slowly and said, “And?”

“And then?” Lumian raised his eyebrows and replied with a smile, “Then I killed him.”

Upon hearing this, Faustino, the butler standing beside the Commanding Officer, glanced at the Werewolf’s corpse on the ground and then at Lumian, whose clothes were clearly charred and torn. His expression was no longer calm and composed.

Gardner Martin’s eyes narrowed. After a few seconds of silence, he sighed and said, “Unfortunately, you don’t know how to channel spirits; we missed out on a lot of information.”

Lumian wanted to say, “Perhaps I need a mystical item that can channel spirits,” but he was worried that it would take up a portion of the reward and cause the Shadow Branch to lose its match.

Gardner Martin continued, “I’ll arrange for follow-up investigations and responses. Don’t worry about this for the time being. I’ll inform you when you need to carry out your mission.”

“What’s he up to? He doesn’t seem simple.” Lumian glanced at the Werewolf’s corpse and deliberately expressed his confusion.

Gardner Martin shook his head.

“I can’t be sure yet.” He then looked at Lumian and asked with a smile, “Do you want this Werewolf fang or something else?”

“What are the choices?” Lumian didn’t hold back.

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Chapter 296 - 296 Request

296 Request

Gardner Martin was well accustomed to Lumian's straightforwardness. He gave a slight nod and said, "If you want a quick trade, I have three items of equal value to the Werewolf fang."

"The first is the Shadow Bracelet, a mystical item that lets you conceal yourself within larger shadows. It can summon a Shadow Servant with a few special abilities and can bring shadows to life to restrain targets to some extent.

"It's a foreboding item. More than a third of those who've used it have gone mad, while another third mysteriously disappeared without it, never to be seen again. Many of those who remain seem fine, but they often complain of tinnitus and hallucinate sounds.

"In recent years, unless there are special circumstances, no one has dared to use this mystical item."

Lumian expressed his confusion through his gaze: Then why are you offering it to me? Do I look like a lunatic or an idiot to you?

Gardner Martin smiled and explained, "I'm one of the few people who hasn't encountered problems with the Shadow Bracelet. I know a way to weaken its negative effects, but I can only tell you if you choose it."

When did you start hallucinating that there's nothing wrong with you? Lumian suppressed his concerns and held his tongue.

He thought that Gardner Martin, who had been corrupted by the abnormality at 13 Avenue du Marché, might not be any better than those who had gone mad or disappeared mysteriously.

According to Madam Magician's description of corruption, the person standing before him might not be the same Gardner Martin as before.

Gardner Martin glanced at Lumian and smiled. "Actually, there's no need to be so reserved in front of me. That won't make you seem like a Hunter who hasn't advanced to Sequence 6. If you say something that might 'provoke' me, I'll probably just respond with sarcasm. Look, isn't Albus still alive and well?"

"Yes, CO Sir," Lumian replied, not revealing the secrets that couldn't be disclosed to the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Gardner Martin got up from his recliner and continued, “The second item is a Beyonder characteristic left behind by a Spirit Medium. Do you know what Beyonder characteristics are?”

Lumian answered calmly, “Killing a Beyonder creature will yield one of the main ingredients for concocting a potion. Killing a Beyonder will definitely yield the corresponding items, just like the transparent golden-red ball from ‘Hammer’ Ait and this Werewolf fang.”

“I believe these are Beyonder characteristics. They all correspond to a potion. There’s no need to gather additional main ingredients, right?”

Gardner Martin nodded approvingly. “That’s right. Your judgment is accurate.”

Gardner Martin didn’t go into detail about the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, as if he believed it involved many secrets Lumian couldn’t grasp at the moment.

With his hands clasped behind his back, Gardner Martin paced in front of the unlit fireplace.

“Spirit Medium. From its name, you can roughly guess the abilities of the mystical item created from it. Of course, what you obtain depends on an Artisan’s ability.

“If I’m not mistaken, it should be an Eye of Death, allowing one to disguise as a zombie and endure the effects of decay, cold, death, and other auras. It can also identify the weaknesses of undead creatures and directly communicate with natural spirits and various undead creatures in the real world, using them for various magical effects. If you’re lucky enough, you might even have all of those abilities.

“Try not to carry this Beyonder characteristic with you. Otherwise, you’ll become the target of surrounding natural spirits and undead creatures. You’ll never know when you might suffer a bizarre attack.”

Impressive as it sounds, it’s somewhat similar to a Contractee—relying on other creatures to gain strength… Lumian pondered for a few seconds and asked, “And the third?”

Gardner Martin settled back into his recliner.

“It’s also a Beyonder characteristic. If you carry it, you’ll find yourself rather lucky. This will be reflected in the details of various matters.

“The corresponding Sequence name is Lucky One, but you have to remember that reveling in luck is often a precursor to disaster. Also, it might allow you to see things you shouldn’t see.”

Sequence 7 of the Monster pathway? Lumian recalled the contents of Aurore’s grimoires.

The Monster pathway, also known as the Fate pathway, was a pathway known for its high spiritual perception and close connection to fate.

Lumian chuckled and said, “The Lucky One ultimately transformed into a Beyonder characteristic in an unlucky manner? What an ironic joke.”

Gardner Martin agreed. “Don’t underestimate bad luck, and don’t rely on luck. Otherwise, you may also become a Beyonder characteristic.”

“Very philosophical.” Lumian took note of the words filled with experience and lessons learned.

He carefully recalled Gardner Martin’s introduction and realized that he wasn’t stingy with information about the corresponding Sequences.

Merely the descriptions of the abilities of a Spirit Medium and Lucky One could fetch a good price at many mystical gatherings.

Gardner Martin pointed at the blackish-green fang on the ground.

“It’s a Werewolf Beyonder characteristic. Once transformed into a mystical item, it should provide powerful self-healing abilities, allow transformation into a werewolf, and grant a short burst of power at the expense of rationality.

“But, as you saw, Werewolves are always affected by killing and bloodlust. During the full moon or Blood Moon, there’s the latent danger of losing your mind and control.

“Have you decided which item to choose? If you choose the Beyonder characteristics, I can help you contact an Artisan and assist with the production fee. It’s the reward you deserve for your contribution tonight.”

Is the Artisan you’re hiring a Saint? How will you react if you discover that I’m hiding a Shadow Branch? Lumian wondered, seriously considering his options.

First, he eliminated the Shadow Bracelet, suspected to be a mystical item of Mr. K’s pathway. Mr. K might offer similar but better options in his rewards soon. Besides, the negative effects of the Shadow Bracelet were too perilous. Even if Gardner Martin claimed he could weaken them, Lumian didn’t dare take the risk.

Most importantly, such a risk was pointless.

A Spirit Medium can compensate for my shortcomings, but it doesn’t complement the Shadow Branch. I can’t create a mystical item with the effect of lingering human-ghost emotions. Yes, some characteristics overlap with a Contractee…

Lucky One can make the Shadow Branch always trigger suitable desires? The Werewolf’s rationality sacrifice and the influence of being murderous and bloodthirsty are quite compatible with the Shadow Branch. I wonder what kind of mystical item it would produce…

After careful consideration that spanned a few minutes, Lumian made his decision.

“I want Lucky One.”

The main reason he gave up the Werewolf Beyonder characteristic was its potential negative effect of losing rationality.

Others might find ways to reduce the impact, using it only when facing enemies or avoiding certain lunar phases. But Lumian couldn’t take that risk. Losing his mind even once could lead to Termiboros exploiting him and causing the seal to lose its balance.

Furthermore, he belonged to the Inevitability domain as a Beyonder in some way. In the future, when he reached a higher Sequence, he might be able to enhance the mystical item’s effects through the Lucky One trait.

As for seeing things he shouldn’t, Lumian already had the Mystery Prying Glasses, so having something similar didn’t bother him.

Gardner Martin seemed surprised. He had expected Lumian to choose between the Spirit Medium Beyonder characteristic and Shadow Bracelet.

However, he quickly composed himself and didn’t inquire further. With a smile, he said, “Humans are obsessed with good luck.”

The Boss of the Savoie Mob, Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, briefly left the activity room and went upstairs.

A few minutes later, he returned with a transparent glass jar, once used to hold sweets.

Inside the jar lay a mercury-colored eyeball, swiveling left and right as if it were alive.

“To carry and store it, place it in a narrow dark space,” Gardner Martin instructed as he wrapped the jar in black cloth.

Handing the item to Lumian, he added, “Change the jar every seven days.”

“Thank you, CO Sir.” Lumian put the glass jar containing the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic into his pocket.

Gardner Martin didn’t wonder why Lumian didn’t ask him to contact an Artisan. The true effects of a mystical item were something the wielder wanted to keep as secret as possible. Seeking an unknown Artisan was more conducive to secrecy.

Just as these thoughts crossed his mind, Lumian brought up the matter himself.

“CO Sir, I’d like to exchange the free Artisan service for other rewards.”

Curious, Gardner Martin asked, “What reward do you desire?”

A grin crept across Lumian’s face. “Help me find someone.”

“Who?” Gardner Martin had a hunch.

Lumian’s expression turned serious.

“Guillaume Bénet.

“Since you know I’m from Cordu, you must have seen the padre’s wanted poster.

“I’ve been tracking him, hoping to apprehend the heretic who caused disaster for me. I just received information that he might appear in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge next week. I’d like to request your assistance in locating him, CO Sir.”

Gardner Martin burst into laughter.

“I thought you wanted to handle it yourself, enduring pain, tracking alone, and seeking revenge in secret.

“Nicely done. You’ve learned to leverage an organization’s strength sooner than I expected. That’s something a Hunter must understand.

“I agree to your request.”

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Chapter 297 - 297 Informant Contract

297 Informant Contract

On his way back to the market district, Lumian leaned against the carriage wall, pondering the whole situation once more. He realized he had overlooked a problem.

A Sequence 7 mysteriously vanishes during a relatively simple mission, and it is now suspected to be dead. Would the secret organization behind him just pretend that nothing had happened?

Would they realize the truth tonight and launch an investigation?

As a Conspirer, there's no way the Boss wouldn't have thought of this. Yet, he didn't warn me and allowed me to go home alone… Is he using me as bait?

Yes, the secret organization behind the Werewolf might not take action tonight. As long as they keep their wits about them, they should realize that their missing subordinate is a huge problem. It seems the Savoie Mob is not as simple as it appears. If I were in their shoes, I'd hold back for a while until further events unfold. Then, I'd use the chaos to figure out the true situation of the Savoie Mob.

Of course, if they have an angel's protection and can get Him to temporarily descend upon Salle de Bal Brise, they can do whatever they want…

Now that I think about it, although that Werewolf was arrogant, he wasn't that stupid or reckless. He's just average. He must have captured some ordinary members of the Savoie Mob beforehand and roughly figured out the situation of the few leaders before targeting the leader who recently joined the Savoie Mob—me. Logically speaking, I wouldn't have been involved in the Savoie Mob's core matters. I wouldn't know many secrets, and I won't cause too many implications…

Furthermore, ordinary members of the Savoie Mob don't know that I've advanced to Pyromaniac. Judging from my recent combat records, that fellow believes he can easily handle me. In close combat, a Werewolf with stronger self-healing abilities, faster speed, greater strength, and nimble reactions, possessing claws equivalent to Beyonder weapons, is far superior to a Provoker…

By the time Lumian returned to Salle de Bal Brise, he had already sorted out the situation. He touched Mr. K's finger in his pocket and entered the room on the second floor, seemingly oblivious. He washed up and went to bed.

…

As the sun began to rise, Jenna hurriedly left 17 Rue Pasteur in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, a piece of toast in her mouth.

Last night, she had returned to visit her brother. She tossed and turned in the bed that she had shared with her mother until midnight before finally falling asleep. She woke up early in the morning, not wanting to run into her neighbors who might inquire about the wanted criminal named “Celia Bello.”

It was still dark, and the streets were mostly empty. Jenna passed by the few vendors and passersby and turned into an alley near Rue Saint-Hilaire, which was even more desolate.

And then, she saw a familiar figure approaching.

He was a man with brown skin, thick lips, and light-yellow hair neatly combed. He had native blood from the Southern Continent and an inconspicuous piece of tape on the bridge of his nose. Wearing a light-colored shirt and a yellow vest, a golden Sun Sacred Emblem was pinned to his chest.

Sun Sacred Emblem… Jenna’s heart skipped a beat as she remembered who he was.

He was a Beyonder from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, once responsible for protecting Hugues Artois!

Jenna instinctively wanted to turn and leave the alley, but she noticed another Beyonder from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church standing guard at the alley’s exit! He too was an Eternal Blazing Sun Church Beyonder who had protected Hugues Artois!

Valentine’s eyes were bluer than lake water, and his expression was cold.

Jenna stopped turning and held her breath. Her right hand rested on her waist, ready to draw her hidden revolver and dagger in an instant.

Seeing her cautious stance, Imre quickly called out, “Relax! We’re not here to arrest you.”

Recalling Franca’s analysis about the possibility of the official Beyonders making her an informant, Jenna calmed down a bit, but still eyed Imre and Valentine warily.

Imre flashed a friendly smile and said, “We do eliminate wild Beyonders, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have options.”

“Don’t be intimidated by the rumors about the stake. This is Trier. Wild Beyonders who aren’t truly sinful won’t face such a fate. Of course, similar cases happen in other provinces, villages, small cities, and towns.”

Jenna grew more certain of the official Beyonders' intentions. She feigned inexperience and asked, "What do you want from me?"

Imre smiled.

"We hope you can cooperate with us.

"In fact, if we hadn't deliberately let you go, you would have been arrested long ago."

Jenna pondered for a moment, thinking about how she managed to lead a peaceful life after assassinating Hugues Artois.

After a while, she asked hesitantly, "Cooperate?"

Imre smiled and nodded.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Imre, a Purifier of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition. This is my colleague, Valentine.

"Not every wild Beyonder earns our goodwill and the chance to cooperate. We've looked into your situation and confirmed that you're also a believer of God and haven't committed any serious offenses. Moreover, after gaining superpowers, you restrained yourself and didn't misuse your abilities, except for assassinating Hugues Artois.

"We understand your hatred and your choice. After all, he's a heretic who deserves death. Anyone has the right to purify him on behalf of God. You must know that if we hadn't arranged it and deliberately turned a blind eye to your actions, you wouldn't have escaped from the member of parliament's office."

Jenna nodded slowly, showing that she had realized it later.

Imre continued, "Because you're a believer who inherently stays true to yourself and doesn't abuse your abilities, we want to invite you to be our informant and provide us with corresponding intel.

"Don't worry, we won't force you to betray your friends. We just want you to keep an eye out for anything that might bring disaster to the market district and Trier."

Stay true to myself and refrain from abusing my abilities… I used to be like that in the past, barely so in the present, but will I be in the future? Jenna thought, mocking herself. She wanted to tell them that they had arrived too late, and she was no longer the same person.

After a moment's hesitation, she said, "I also live in the market district. I'd be glad to help resolve any issues that might harm this place through you."

She tactfully expressed her willingness to cooperate.

At that moment, Jenna felt inspired and blurted out, “I discovered something two days ago!”

“What?” Imre glanced at his teammate Valentine in surprise.

They hadn’t expected their newly-hired informant to provide intel right away.

Jenna recounted how she’d attended a mysterious gathering where she heard about the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister’s gatekeeper. Upon accepting the corresponding commission, she described how she and her companion accidentally stumbled upon a cybernetic-eyed monk entering a nearby quarry and opening a secret cave filled with numerous human arms and legs.

Throughout the process, she kept her companion’s identity and name, as well as the time and location of the mysticism gathering, hidden.

Imre and Valentine were a mix of joy and solemnity.

They were delighted by the unexpected gain, but the peculiarity of the situation also troubled them.

“Very good. That’s the kind of cooperation we need,” Imre praised Jenna after she finished speaking.

Valentine nodded reluctantly.

It wasn’t that he didn’t see the need for such an informant; the incident with Hugues Artois had changed his perception of wild Beyonders significantly. However, he was a bit emotional as Imre could have convinced Celia Bello alone, yet he insisted on involving Valentine.

After praising the morning sun, he could have gone home to rest and enjoy breakfast with his family.

Nevertheless, Imre’s reasoning was sound.

According to the rules, it was best to have two Purifiers present when developing informants, especially Beyonders who belonged to a few pathways like Demoness.

Imre explained that over the years, many Purifiers had fallen into the trap of being seduced while developing Demonesses as informants or pursuing them. This led them to fall in love, betray the Church, and lose control amid the torment of faith.

Hence, having two Purifiers to supervise each other in such cases was essential.

Though Jenna was still an Assassin and had plenty to go before qualifying as a true Demoness of Pleasure, one couldn’t be careless about such matters, especially with a rare female Assassin.

After the praise, Imre added, “Cooperation means both sides can benefit from this matter. We’ll reward you accordingly based on the intel you provide. You can choose from money, materials, knowledge, weapons, and more.”

Jenna hesitated for a moment before asking, “Will there be a reward for what I just said?”

“What do you want?” Imre inquired.

“The main ingredient of the Instigator potion,” Jenna replied without hesitation,

having already received the potion formula from Franca.

Imre wasn’t surprised. He nodded and said, “We’ll discuss it after we verify the authenticity and importance of this intel.”

“Alright,” Jenna replied, not too disappointed as she didn’t hold out much hope.

Imre produced an ordinary-looking piece of white paper with a few simple clauses written on it, outlining what he had just said.

The terms didn’t demand Jenna’s faith to be constantly with the Eternal Blazing Sun, but they required her not to believe in an evil god.

Being experienced, Jenna read the terms over and over again until she confirmed that there were no issues, and then she readily signed her real name.

She watched Imre take out a fountain pen made of pure gold and sign his name. He then quickly wrote a few bright red words in the Notary position.

A sun-like glow briefly enveloped the contract before vanishing.

After bidding farewell to Imre and Valentine, Jenna headed towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.

…

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Lumian roused Franca from her sleep at the crack of dawn and faced her wrathful expression as he recounted the Werewolf incident.

Franca swiftly focused her mind and mumbled contemplatively, “If there’s a follow-up investigation, the one you’ll face will either be Zombie or Wraith. I’m more inclined to believe the latter.”

“Huh?” Lumian was bewildered.

Franca explained matter-of-factly, “They are Sequence 6 and Sequence 5 of the Prisoner pathway.”

Lumian sighed, still puzzled, and commented, “You seem to know this pathway quite well.”

“Of course.” Franca chuckled. “In the whole world, besides a few Prisoner pathway Beyonders, the rest belong to two factions. One is the Southern Continent’s terrorist organization, the Rose School of Thought, that I mentioned earlier, and the other is…”

At this point, she paused, teasing Lumian deliberately. After a few seconds, she revealed, “Mr. Fool’s Church.”

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Chapter 298 - 298 Rose School of Thought

298 Rose School of Thought

Mr. Fool's Church? Lumian was both surprised and unsurprised by the answer.

He hadn't expected the Church of The Fool to have a large number of Beyonders from the Prisoner pathway, but he figured that, according to the Bible's description, it wasn't too surprising for anyone from any pathway to appear.

Franca smiled and began to explain in detail, "Actually, the Prisoner pathway Beyonders of the Rose School of Thought and the Prisoner pathway Beyonders of the Church of The Fool were originally one."

"They later fractured?" Lumian hazarded a guess.

Franca confirmed tersely. "The Rose School of Thought is an incredibly ancient organization, boasting a history stretching back over two millennia, even predating the Fourth Epoch—prior to the Cataclysm."

Over 2,000 years old… Lumian was astonished.

When he learned that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had been established only 200 to 300 years ago, he had considered it ancient. But compared to the Rose School of Thought, the Iron and Blood Cross Order seemed like a child who hadn't even attended compulsory education.

Franca continued, "The Rose School of Thought was originally an orthodox organization in the Southern Continent. It ruled the Paz Valley and Star Highlands, where the government and the church were one, until the invasion of the Northern Continent's countries."

"When the invasion occurred, they lost their country and went underground, becoming clandestine. On the one hand, they resisted the colonists and attempted to expel them from the Southern Continent. On the other hand, they frequently caused terrorist acts in the Northern Continent. Heh heh, this actually had no effect on their resistance to colonization. Instead, it incurred the hatred of the people of various countries. Of course, their primary goal might not be this. Perhaps it's purely for blood sacrifice and certain rituals."

"How did they fracture?" Lumian was more concerned about this question.

Franca leisurely paced two steps in the living room.

“The Rose School of Thought has held different beliefs for ages. Their core principle revolves around the notion that willpower is born from diverse desires, capable of reshaping reality and achieving incredible feats. Yet, there’s a divide in how they approach these desires.

“Some adhere to indulgence, embracing passionate cravings at all times, even resorting to bloody or primitive sacrificial rituals to bolster their willpower. On the other hand, the temperance faction, working from the potions’ names, advocates for suppressing desires, keeping them pent up within their hearts, only unleashing them during critical moments to unleash formidable forces.

“Hence, one faction is known for indulgence, while the other is the temperance faction.”

Prisoner… Lumian silently echoed the name of Sequence 9 potion and pondered. “I reckon the temperance faction has got it right.”

“Any sensible person would think the same. After all, the body is like a cage for the heart, and the world is a cage for the body. Madness must be curbed, and desires must be reined in,” Franca sneered. “But there’ll always be a few with a few screws loose. After indulgence, all that’s left is madness. They’ll barely be able to retain their basic faculties.”

No wonder the Werewolf reacted that way… It seems he truly belongs to the Rose School of Thought… If the others in their ranks share his mindset, it only confirms their strength. Surviving to this day without wit would demand remarkable strength… Lumian’s thoughts carried both mockery and vigilance.

Franca gazed out the window, watching the daylight grow brighter, and spoke, “In the beginning, the indulgence faction and the temperance faction barely tolerated each other. If you ignore me, I won’t meddle with you or the people you protect. But later, the indulgence faction started claiming that the Chained God, whom both factions believe in, is actually the embodiment of some evil god.”

Some evil god… Giving in to desires… Lumian’s brow furrowed as he sought confirmation.

“Mother Tree of Desire?”

“Yes,” Franca smiled. “Someone you know, or rather, a deity you know.”

No, I don’t want to know Her at all… The Rose School of Thought actually believes in the Mother Tree of Desire. The Werewolf’s investigation of the Savoie Mob’s information seems more complicated than I suspected… Does the Bliss Society have any connection to the Rose School of Thought? Or do they withhold such information? Lumian fell deep into thought.

Franca sighed sincerely and said, “Powers related to desire can be quite useful, but why can’t they be used for the right purpose?”

“Blame it on the evil god?” Lumian cautioned his companion. “It’s best if you don’t try.”

Franca smiled sheepishly and said, “I still know what I can try and what I shouldn’t. I understand the dangers posed by evil gods better than you.”

“Yes, later on, the indulgence faction launched a surprise attack on the temperance faction and inflicted severe injuries. The remaining members of the temperance faction fled in a sorry state and were hunted down for a long time until they found protection under Mr. Fool.”

“I’ve heard that Saint Sharron from Mr. Fool’s Church was once a member of the temperance faction. Likewise for the Angel of the Holy Spirit beside Mr. Fool’s throne…”

The indulgence faction is terrifyingly powerful to be able to hunt down the angel-led temperance faction and send them scurrying. There’s no doubt they have angels, and not just one… And Mr. Fool’s Church can protect the temperance faction… After hearing this, Lumian gained a rough understanding of the Rose School of Thought’s history. He grew more confident in the Church of The Fool’s strength and associated some of the names from the Bible with significant figures in reality.

Simultaneously, he understood why the Knight of Swords, the other holder of a Minor Arcana card, intended to blow up the Rose School of Thought’s weapons warehouse.

“Heh heh, should we stop calling it the Rose School of Thought? Can’t we just call it the School of Indulgence?” Lumian taunted.

Franca replied in amusement, “What a lame name! Do you think every secret organization is as uncreative as the Iron and Blood Cross Order?”

As they chatted, they heard Jenna’s familiar gait approaching.

Jenna opened the door and was taken aback to find Lumian standing there.

“Something happened to him last night,” Franca explained.

“What happened?” Jenna scrutinized Lumian but found no signs of injury.

Franca briefly recounted the Werewolf and Rose School of Thought, leaving out the deep connection that tied her, Lumian, and the Church of The Fool.

The more Jenna listened, the more alarmed she became. She felt that a Sequence 9 was nothing in the world of mysticism.

Her determination to become an Instigator as soon as possible grew stronger.

After the discussion, Franca added, “I’ll briefly explain the situation of Zombie and the Wraith so you don’t rush forward without knowing anything or sense the abnormality without realizing it.

“Compared to Werewolf, a Zombie’s greatest transformation is their steel-like sturdiness. They’re unafraid of fire, bullets, or cannonballs. You need to hit the same spot more than five times in a row to break through their defenses. As Zombies, as long as their heads remain intact, they are not in danger.

“They have also mastered decomposition, frost, and death-type spells that can awaken and control ghosts and corpses.

“A Wraith can freely transform into a specter. They no longer have a physical body and are unafraid of physical damage. Their spellcasting abilities are significantly improved. They can even forcefully possess you, taking control of your body and making you kill yourself.

“After entering the Wraith state, they can traverse different mirrors and use them to conceal themselves. Even if you activate your Spirit Vision, it’s almost impossible to see them directly.

“If you encounter something similar to a poltergeist, you mustn’t be careless. You have to consider the possibility of dealing with a true Wraith.”

Lumian listened attentively and pondered before saying, “Are attacks targeting the spirit more effective against Zombies and Wraiths?”

“Yes, I recommend the abilities of the Sun domain,” Franca said with a chuckle. “However, I suggest that you run if you can when facing such an enemy. If you can’t, seek help quickly.”

Lumian never found it embarrassing to ask for help. As he expressed his agreement, he proposed a new idea.

“They’re all members of the indulgence faction. Wouldn’t it be better to deal with them using an ability to influence desires?”

If that was the case, the mystical item made from Shadow Branch would come in handy.

Lumian had yet to contact Madam Magician. He planned to wait for Mr. K to reward him before deciding which domain’s Beyonder characteristic to match the Shadow Branch.

“In theory, yes, but it might have the opposite effect,” Franca warned him.

After discussing the Rose School of Thought, Jenna recounted how she had been recruited as an informant and provided information about the Deep Valley Cloister.

Franca genuinely felt happy for her.

“That’s right. This way, you’ll have a fixed source for resources, but the officials are very strict about key items. You can’t rely on them completely.”

Lumian hadn’t expected Valentine to be in the market district as well. He was concerned about his lack of necessary disguises. The Mystery Prying Glasses could only be used at critical moments.

After some thought, he said to Jenna, “Showing your devotion to the Eternal Blazing Sun in front of a Purifier will yield unexpected gains.”

“You seem very experienced.” Jenna’s eyes darted around, sensing that Ciel held many secrets.

…

Leaving 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian strolled back to Salle de Bal Brise.

The more he delved into secret organizations, the more he sensed his lack of knowledge about mysticism.

Lumian sipped a glass of absinthe and settled into his office.

Just as he was about to find a more comfortable position, starlight oozed forth, forming a dazzling and dreamy door.

The door swung open, and Madam Magician emerged. Today, she sported a beige shirt, a brownish-yellow dress, and dark brown leather boots.

What’s the matter? Lumian rose to his feet.

Madam Magician grinned and replied, “The friend I mentioned earlier, the one who can help you decipher the symbolic elements, has finished his recent work and is on a short vacation. I’ll take you to him now.”

Lumian responded with unusual excitement, “Alright!”

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Chapter 299 - 299 Interpretation

299 Interpretation

Lumian had been eagerly waiting for the dream symbols to be interpreted so that he could get enough clues before meeting with Padre Guillaume Bénet.

Only then could he effectively interrogate his target.

This time, when Madam Magician placed her hand on his shoulder, the usual layers of saturated colors and strange creatures were absent.

Instead, he felt a surge of starlight before finding himself in a distorted and concealed dark tunnel. His spirit and body seemed in chaos, unsure if he was moving forward, retreating, or simultaneously ascending and descending.

The state lasted briefly, but Lumian couldn't grasp the duration accurately, as if time had slipped from his grasp temporarily.

When he returned to his senses, he almost suspected that he was at Salle de Bal Brise just a moment ago, and in the next instant, he had arrived at his destination.

Before him lay a primitive forest, its dense canopy almost blotting out the sky. In an open space surrounded by towering trees stood a brownish-yellow hunter's hut.

"Go in," Madam Magician's voice echoed, though he couldn't see the demigod.

Following her instructions, Lumian stepped forward, treading on tumbling leeches and navigating through the dancing poisonous insects in the air and vegetation. He reached the hunter's hut and pushed open the unlatched wooden door.

Inside, rows of bookshelves lined the walls, and a wooden table stood in the center, seemingly existing in a different world compared to the primitive forest outside.

A figure sat behind the table, dressed in a white shirt and an open black coat, appearing somewhat obscured by a thick fog. Lumian could barely make out the clothes, facial features, and gender of the person, but not his face clearly.

"Have a seat," the figure spoke with a slightly magnetic and ethereal voice.

"Hello," Lumian greeted with a polite bow before taking a seat. "May I know how I should address you?"

The figure pondered for a moment and replied, "Think of me as a poet."

Poet? Lumian didn't fully grasp the significance of the code name, but he still chose to show respect. "Hello, Mr. Poet."

The poet gave a small nod and said, "Magician has already shared the entire dream and related information with me, but I'd still like to hear you recount it in detail."

Addressing her directly as Magician… Is he also a member of the Tarot Club? A holder of a Major Arcana card? Lumian sized up the poet opposite him with a guess.

In the dense fog's outline, he got a clearer impression.

His black hair was longer than usual, giving him an artistic appearance. His eyes were emerald green, not sharp but captivating. He had a slim face and a relaxed posture…

The combination of these elements and the thick fog made the poet seem like he emerged from a dream.

"Alright," Lumian replied.

He recounted Cordu's nightmare, supplemented by the various traces found in the ruins and the vast amount of information he gathered over the past month.

Compared to before, his emotions were still stirred by recalling these matters, but not as intensely. Throughout the entire process, he only took a single deep breath.

As he spoke, Lumian noticed the poet, leaning back in his chair, clasping his hands between his chest and abdomen. The poet's green eyes were much clearer than before.

In the next second, Lumian noticed strange insects crawling in and out of the other party's eye sockets.

The insects switched between translucency and opaqueness, as if carrying rings on their backs.

Such a scene nearly made Lumian forget to continue his recount. It was like facing the headless monster created by Supervisor Olson. He couldn't help but feel shocked.

He composed himself and forced himself to ignore the strange insects wriggling into his eyes, expressing everything he wanted to say.

After his words trailed off, the poet fell silent for a moment before continuing, "It's truly a dream filled with symbolic meaning.

"Let's start with the simplest part—the deceased Warlock in the tomb."

Doesn’t it symbolize Aurore becoming Inevitability’s Blessed and ultimately dying? Lumian was about to ask this question, but before he could, the poet seemed to sense his thoughts and took the initiative to explain.

“This is a typical dual-structure symbol. In other words, it contains two layers of meaning.

“The first layer is about the Warlock representing the power of Inevitability, or rather, corruption. And it also stands for Termiboros. The coffin is like the concept of ‘death.’ Both symbolize the sealing of Inevitability’s power and its loss of vitality. The tomb itself represents the seal.

“In the dream, we can see that the Warlock is truly dead and has never left the tomb. This aligns with the sealed state on your body.

“Your sister Aurore got some boon from Inevitability in this incident as well. She’s suspected to be one of the leaders, embodying the power of Inevitability to a certain extent. Plus, she’s already dead, so the Warlock matter takes on a second symbolic meaning.

“These two layers of symbolism are superimposed through Inevitability’s core power, which can easily make interpreters overlook one of them.”

So that’s how it is… Lumian’s heart sank as he gradually became convinced by the poet. From another perspective, he now understood the essence of the Warlock legend.

The poet kept his seated posture, and there were no longer any strange insects crawling in and out of his eye sockets.

“Now that we’ve unraveled the full symbolism of the deceased Warlock, there’s a preliminary answer for the owl and the other you.

“The other you symbolizes both your mutated personality due to corruption and Termiboros’s attempt to achieve His goal by influencing your thoughts. If we only had the first symbol, the other you probably wouldn’t be able to leave the tomb.

“The fact that the owl can freely enter and exit the deceased Warlock’s tomb means that it can bypass the seal to some extent. It also displayed a few characteristics: monitoring your changes, not showing up at critical moments, and guarding the deceased Warlock.

“Based on our interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the deceased Warlock, the owl represents another Blessed of Inevitability, assigned to monitor your condition. Its attitude towards the deceased Warlock is quite ambiguous. It didn’t exhibit the protective behavior it should have, nor did it assist during the final ritual with the angel’s descent.

“Bypassing the seal suggests it’s in the outside world and might be communicating with Termiboros in some way. I’m not entirely sure about that yet. You shouldn’t

ignore other possibilities."

So, the symbol of the Sufferer turns out to be the owl. I thought it was the other me or Aurore… Lumian heaved a sigh of relief but also felt a sense of disappointment.

During the momentary pause in the poet's speech, he seized the opportunity to pose a question. "The underground altar exists, but what does the Sufferer aura in the dream symbolize?"

"The first layer symbolizes the previous appearance of the power of Inevitability there, but only on this layer. It's unlikely that the symbolic elements will take the form of the Sufferer aura." The poet took a moment to interpret. "As for the second layer, if the owl—the Blessed of Inevitability—who watches over you is already a Sufferer, it means it doesn't want others to come into contact with the altar of Inevitability. It also symbolizes the power of Inevitability.

"Furthermore, we observed that you suffered the least damage back then. This suggests that the Sufferer isn't willing to kill you. It might even protect you to some extent. This is quite similar to the psychiatric treatment you experienced in Trier's market district."

So, from the beginning, that person was already eying Termiboros? Of course, before his intentions are fully revealed, he will cooperate with Termiboros to do something… Termiboros attempted to influence me several times, but without success. Could this be the reason? Lumian couldn't help but sympathize with the Inevitability angel sealed in his chest.

The poet continued, "I suspect there's a third symbolic layer. It represents a true Sufferer in Cordu, a Sufferer who's not at the Beyonder level."

A true Sufferer… Lumian's heart skipped a beat.

He made numerous connections but couldn't find the correct answer.

The poet wasn't entirely certain about this, so he didn't elaborate further. Instead, he focused on interpreting the symbol that Lumian was most concerned about.

"Whether or not the lizard-like elf actually exists, its symbolic importance in the dream is quite evident.

"Firstly, it represents a yearning for the cemetery and a fascination with entering and exiting tombs, but it never truly enters the tomb of the deceased Warlock. This signifies its affiliation with another faction, linked to the power of Inevitability, yet not exactly the same. It appears to be using this connection to seek and attain something related to Inevitability.

Another faction… Lumian recalled the diaphanous "lizard" present during the Tree of Shadow incident.

The poet sat up straighter.

“Secondly, it symbolizes concealed corruption and unconscious alterations.

“In the entire dream, only two individuals had a lizard-like elf crawl out of their mouths. One was your sister Aurore, and the other was the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue. What do you recall about him in reality?”

Lumian pondered for a moment and responded, “He’s somewhat similar to the dream, but not as exaggerated.

“He’s a devoted follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. When he was shunned by Guillaume Bénet, he became fixated on giving sermons and hearing confessions. Later, his behavior became more and more apparent, neglecting all other matters…”

Suddenly, Lumian was startled.

He thought of Aurore, the other person from the dream who had a lizard-like elf emerge from their mouth.

Hadn’t she also neglected to ask Hela for help?

Mr. Poet nodded.

“Your sister Aurore should have exhibited similar behavior.

“Thirdly, the faction or deity represented by the lizard-like elf does not want to witness an angel of Inevitability descending. It symbolizes the role of a saboteur.”

Seeing Lumian’s confusion, the poet continued, “If it hadn’t been the person with the lizard-like elf crawling out of their mouth who knocked you out, brought you to the final sacrificial site, and turned you into a vessel, the descent ritual might have succeeded.

“Consider this: during the ritual, if someone else had stood in front of Aurore instead of you, would she have gained a moment of clarity and pushed him off the altar?”

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Chapter 300 - 300 Another Symbol

300 Another Symbol

Upon hearing Mr. Poet's question, Lumian was caught off guard. A shiver ran up his spine and pierced his brain like an icy dagger.

Whether it was Aurore, who had knocked him out in the dream and led him to the sacrificial grounds, or the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, who had done it in reality, they all had been secretly corrupted by the lizard-like elves—evident from them crawling out of their mouths!

If Lumian hadn't become the vessel, forced onto the altar and stood before Aurore, Termiboros's descent ritual might have succeeded. Aurore wouldn't have pushed the vessel out the altar, ruining the rite, and Lumian's Mr. Fool mark wouldn't have been activated!

This realization left Lumian's mind in chaos.

He never imagined that the lizard-like elf was behind the sabotage of the ritual. They had insidiously corrupted Aurore and the deputy padre, making them blind to important matters and missing their last chance to save themselves!

"W-what does it want? What's its true motive?" Lumian asked, feeling a pang of pain.

The poet's voice, veiled in mist, replied calmly, "I'm just interpreting the symbolic meaning of your dream's elements. I can't fully reconstruct the truth.

"But I can offer some speculation.

"The faction represented by the lizard-like elves aims to use the large-scale sacrifice of the Inevitability believers to summon an angel for some hidden purpose. However, they don't want Termiboros to descend upon this land for real.

"There must be a conflict between them and the entity known as Inevitability."

Lumian nodded, finding it the most logical explanation.

He couldn't help but furrow his brow.

"What hidden motives do they have?"

"That's one of the paths for your subsequent investigation," the poet said with a smile. "Decryption isn't divination or prophecy. You need enough information for

deduction. You can't make wild guesses."

Lumian nodded slightly, eager to catch the padre, Guillaume Bénet.

The poet leaned forward, placing his elbows on the wooden table, hands still clasped together.

"I've already deciphered the more crucial symbolic elements. There's only one left.

"Your dream itself holds a strong symbolic meaning."

"The dream itself?" Lumian pondered for a few seconds but couldn't grasp the specific symbolism.

The poet's voice deepened, no longer abnormally ethereal but more magnetic.

"It symbolizes protection.

"Back then, due to intense emotional upheavals, your mind was on the verge of collapse, and you fell into a deep slumber. If not for the comfort and hope brought about by the dream of reality, perhaps you would have collapsed completely. Driven by your self-destructive tendencies, you would have acted irrationally until your death.

"Moreover, we can confirm that you don't have the ability to produce a dream of reality, nor can you draw investigators into that dream. The sealed Termiboros can't do it either. In other words, the dream of reality is a result of external interference.

"We haven't grasped the specific abilities of the High-Sequence Beyonder of the Inevitability pathway. We can't determine if it was done by the Inevitability Blessed symbolized by the owl or if it was influenced by other factions. Given the previous interpretation and the situation in reality, all of them have sufficient motives.

"In short, besides the entity known as Inevitability, no one else wants to see Termiboros truly descend upon the land."

Lumian instantly recalled the area around the blood-colored mountain peak in Cordu's ruins that induced slumber.

Before he could bring up the subject, the poet added, "Considering that the area that forces others into sleep is around the sacrificial ground and not the house where you sleep, I'm inclined to believe that it's influenced by other factions. Their main purpose is to disrupt the ritual, and pacifying you just comes with it.

"If it was done by the Inevitability Blessed symbolized by the owl, the location of the abnormal area would be completely opposite."

The faction represented by the lizard-like elf did it, or someone else did. Is there another faction? The more Lumian understood the situation, the more he realized that the truth of the Cordu disaster was far more complicated than he had expected.

He fell silent, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking.

"What's the significance of the empty baby cradle in the administrator's castle?"

The poet took a few seconds to contemplate and then replied, "It's a rather minor symbol. It represents the child of the Great Mother. Based on the information you provided, it seems that the child might have entered our world secretly during the final sacrificial ritual, aided by another blood-related son hidden by Madame Pualis. It then left Cordu unnoticed, leaving behind the empty cradle."

The spawn of the Great Mother… Lumian hissed to himself, realizing the seriousness of the situation was on par with Termiboros's descent.

Inevitability's faction had taken a significant risk and worked tirelessly for nearly a year, all for the sake of obtaining a sealed angel. Ultimately, it served the Great Mother's purpose.

With those thoughts, Lumian let go of his worries.

The saints and angels of the Tarot Club and the Church of The Fool would undoubtedly handle this matter. It was beyond the concerns of someone like him, a mere Sequence 7.

Besides, this issue primarily revolved around the sacrificial ritual and had little to do with the truth behind the Cordu disaster. Lumian's main focus was tracking down and capturing the padre, Guillaume Bénet.

He then inquired, "Why was the entire Cordu village destroyed, while only my home remained intact?"

The poet pondered for a moment and answered, "I believe it symbolizes Aurore's nostalgia, reluctance, and regret.

"After the ritual, she should have regained some clarity. In the midst of the fusion of the villagers' flesh and blood, she instinctively protected the building that represented her beautiful past life.

"Of course, it's possible she also leveraged other forces interfering with the ritual."

Nostalgia… Reluctance… The beautiful life of the past… Lumian fell silent, lost in thought.

Observing this, the poet unclasped his hands and said, "I've deciphered all the symbolic elements of your dream."

“Thank you, Mr. Poet.” Lumian stood up and, following the Church of The Fool’s customs, pressed his hand to his chest and bowed slightly.

For a moment, his mind turned adrift, seeing the poet, the wooden table, the surrounding bookshelves, walls, the primitive forest outside, and all kinds of insects fade away like a dream, returning to deep darkness.

In an instant, the darkness vanished, and Lumian found himself standing at the edge of a marketplace.

In the distance, there were white buildings with dark black or earthy yellow bell towers and spires. Nearby, cloud-like tents and herds of cows, sheep, and horses were scattered around.

Most of the people passing through the market had dark skin, as if they were exposed to the sun every day. Among them, men wore felt hats and dark-red or sky-blue robes, while women wore colorful multi-layered gowns.

A chilling wind howled as Lumian gazed at the snow-covered mountain peak in the distance, momentarily lost in his thoughts.

His conversation with the poet and what he had just experienced felt like a vivid dream.

No, it was a dream!

That’s why he couldn’t see Mr. Poet clearly.

I didn’t realize I was dreaming at all. When did the dream start? It felt eerily similar to the dream I had in the ruins of Cordu. Could it be that Mr. Poet’s divine path has the power to make others have vivid dreams? And could the abnormal area around the blood-colored mountain be related to similar abilities? Lumian was shocked at first, but then numerous thoughts rushed through his mind.

Just then, Madam Magician appeared before him, wearing a beige shirt, a brownish-yellow dress, and dark brown leather boots.

“Do you want to go back to Salle de Bal Brise now?” the Major Arcana card holder asked.

Lumian casually asked, “Where are we?”

Madam Magician gazed at the azure sky and pure white clouds and replied, “We’re in Star Highlands’ Rapus, once a significant city in the Highlands Kingdom, also known as the City of White.”

Star Highlands… Lumian recalled the Rose School of Thought and recounted the Werewolf attack and Gardner Martin’s arrangements to Madam Magician. Finally, he asked, “Did the Rose School of Thought enter the market district because of the Tree of Shadow? And didn’t they gather detailed information about me from the

Bliss Society?”

Madam Magician chuckled.

“You should have asked these questions earlier. The gentleman who helped you decipher the dream symbols is an expert at dealing with the Rose School of Thought. Alright, I’ll ask him for you now.”

With that, she vanished in front of Lumian. A few minutes later, she reappeared in the same position, unnoticed by the people passing through the market.

Madam Magician smiled at Lumian and said, “Based on that gentleman’s experience, although the Mother Tree of Desire and its worshiping organizations show clear purpose, sufficient decisiveness, accurate foresight of the future, and excellent planning on a higher level and at the macro scale, when it comes to specific events, they often appear chaotic, disorderly, and even mad. It reflects the nature of the evil god itself.

“In simpler terms, the organizations worshiping the Mother Tree of Desire don’t cooperate or communicate well. They sometimes act erratically and unpredictably. It’s a common situation.

“However, in the past year or two, that gentleman noticed some rudimentary cooperation among these organizations. Some members of the Devil families are even involved.”

“Devil families?” Lumian had never heard of such a term.

Madam Magician casually explained, “The families that control the Devil pathway —the Criminal pathway. Some of them show signs of worshiping the Mother Tree of Desire.”

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